AGAINST THE SUN

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The Story of
Wing Commander ROLAND BEAMONT, D.S.O., O.B.E., D.F.C.
Pilot of the Canberra and the P.1

by

EDWARD LANCHBERY

With a Foreword by
Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Saunders
G.C.B., K.B.E., M.C., D.F.C., M.M.

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
by C. Tinling & Co., Ltd., Liverpool, London and Prescot.
F. 655

FOREWORD

by

Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Saunders,
G.C.B., K.B.E., M.C., D.F.C., M.M.

Reading *Against the Sun* brought back vividly the atmosphere of the times and some thrilling memories. Roland Beamont was one of many young pilots who fought through the Battle of Britain and later took part in air operations over France and the Low Countries. The war in the air was continually changing. The Battle of Britain brought to an end the defensive phase. Thereafter emphasis was on the offensive. Fighter Command, no longer tied to the close defence of the U.K., started fighter sweeps over France to bring the enemy to combat. Night intruder operations were developed to intercept enemy aircraft taking off and landing at their home bases. Road and rail communications and other suitable targets were attacked by low-flying fighters by day.

Each new phase of the air war demanded new methods and new tactics. Much was left to the initiative of squadron and wing leaders with guidance and encouragement from group and section commanders. The R.A.F. was indeed fortunate in having young officers of Beamont's calibre whose courage, initiative and determination contributed much to the development of new methods and tactics and to the success of air operations. There are many instances in the book which illustrate this graphically. Beamont in particular was always seeking new methods of harassing the enemy, and he inspired others to follow his lead.

Between operational tours Beamont enjoyed a 'busman's holiday' as a test pilot. The experience gained testing Typhoons and Tempests at Hawker's was of great value to him when he commanded a Typhoon squadron and later a Tempest wing.

Both aircraft suffered serious teething troubles. Beamont's determination and confidence did much to overcome these difficulties and under his enthusiastic leadership both types achieved considerable success as daylight intruders and against the flying bomb.

After the war reaction set in. Many young pilots were torn between love of the R.A.F. and a desire for a more exciting life than peace service in the R.A.F. appeared to offer. Beamont turned to test flying and to-day he is one of the world's foremost test pilots. He has been intimately concerned with the development of Britain's first jet bomber and first supersonic fighter. His demonstration of the Canberra at the S.B.A.C. show in 1949 will never be forgotten by those who saw this brilliant exhibition of flying.

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PROLOGUE

P.1

On the tarmac at the Aeroplane and Armament Experimental Establishment, Boscombe Down, the P.1 gleamed with the bright newness of polished metal. From each angle Britain's first straight and level supersonic fighter, to which widely publicized foreign reports attributed a speed of well over a thousand miles an hour, looked different.

Behind there was a marked likeness to a delta design. In profile the acutely sweptback wing merged into the pencil fuselage to emphasize the impression of a silver streak of speed. Head-on, the fore-shortening of the view focussed attention on the vast, gaping throat of the air intake, and transformed the P.1 into a squat, stocky, bull-necked creature of power.

Fighting down a last minute barrage of anxieties about their calculations and the work they had passed, a score of members of the English Electric design staff and flight test team watched the ground crew preparing the P.1 for the first flight. Amongst them was Frederick Page, the chief engineer, a bespectacled young man of thirty-seven, hiding emotion under an austere intensity of purpose. Graduating from his role of the chief of the stress department on the Canberra project, he had developed and controlled the whole design of the P.1 which sprang from an original idea of W. E. W. Petter. Alec Atkin, the chief flight test engineer, was there, supervising the final touches of the ground crew; and so too was Don Horsfield, the P.1 flight test project engineer.

But for the moment their part was reaching a standstill. On that fourth morning of August, 1904, designers and engineers were handing over to the airman. The care of their work and hopes was passing to the hands of one man, the chief test pilot, thirty-four years old Wing Commander Roland Prosper Beamont, D.S.O. and bar, O.B.E., D.F.C. and bar. He alone would discover whether theory had been translated into performance.

At last the P.1 was finally cleared for flight. Cloud was obscuring five-eighths of the sky and visibility had dropped to fifteen miles, but the forecast anticipated no sudden clamp-down of weather over the aerodrome. Beamont settled himself in the cockpit, and watched Peter Hillwood take off in the Canberra to act as an observer in flight.

Along the runway, visual observers with walkie-talkie radios controlled from a two-way VHF radio van, were taking up their positions. Cameras were set ready to photograph the points of take-off, touch-down and stopping. Another van stood ready with equipment for measuring the brake temperatures. More cine-cameras in the P.1 focused on to various instrument panels. Outside the control tower, a mile away in the middle of the aerodrome, the drivers of the ambulance and the fire-fighting tenders started their engines.

Beamont waved to the group on the tarmac, and shut the cockpit canopy. It was very quiet. He had shut himself off into another world, and the sudden peace and solitude were at once refreshing and relaxing. He knew exactly what he had to do, and nothing else mattered.

After a careful cockpit check he ran up the engines. Their note was distinctive, a humming beat at idle thrust, which rose to a progressive whine as the power increased.

The whine fell back to a hum. He checked the fuel again, and turned on the instrumentation controls that set in action the cine-cameras recording performance, and the vibration and 'G' recorders. Satisfied, he put on his head set, an inner helmet of woven nylon, and a hard, white, outer shell of laminated fibre glass, to which a vizor of dark green sun glass, designed by himself, had been attached. He checked the windscreen demisters, gave full exercise to the powered controls, rechecked the trimmers, and was ready to go.

He switched on his microphone and called Boscombe control tower. 'Tarnish One to Boscombe. Do you read?'

'Boscombe to Tarnish One. Fives clear. Clear to line up and take off.'

'Roger. Loud and clear.'

The engines rose to a whine, the runway whipped towards him like an endless conveyor belt. His eyes concentrated on the air-speed indicator. There it was—the nose wheel lifting speed. He eased back the stick and the P.1 reared up like a praying mantis. For an instant he was conscious of the observers and cameras at the side of the runway: then he was gone, thundering into the sky in a confusion of noise that momentarily swamped all other impressions. But as quickly as it had arisen, the clamour of take-off subsided. Boscombe was rapidly shrinking into the Hampshire countryside, and he knew already that in the P.1 he was back in his element. This was a fighter, and he was a fighter pilot, born and bred.

He looked round for the Canberra, but lost it in cloud which had started to thicken into a layer of stratus. He held his heading, and broke cloud to find the Canberra waiting for him.

'A bit of lateral oscillation on, Bee,' Peter Hillwood said on the radio.

Beamont checked. 'That's not the aircraft, Peter,' he said. 'That's me.' After the Canberra, he was finding himself rather heavy-handed on the fighter's sensitive controls.

'Climbing to fifteen thousand feet at full power, turning to port,' he warned Hillwood. 'You had better cut off the corner to keep up.'

It was his last conscious awareness of position, skyscape, or surroundings. Now, there was nothing but concentration upon flying the aircraft accurately and noting every trait of its behaviour. A concentration in terms of second-by-second observation that left no room for thought of what might happen, and suspended all senses but those of flying skill and anticipation. To the exclusion of all else, these senses worked overtime.

At 15,000 feet he slowed to landing speed and tested the operation of the controls with undercarriage lowered. He tested them again in a run at increased power; on a climb; and in a dive to high speed. Under each condition it was the same—the exhaustive testing, the intent observation of stability and the behaviour of the controls. Step by step he worked through the flight test schedule and a consciousness of well-being and relief spread through him. The machine flew well. The first flight was almost over. Control and stability in the landing condition were very good: the landing was going to be easy.

There was no time, however, for let-up in concentration. More checks of handling with under-carriage and flaps down followed in the circuit, and throughout the approach this intense second-by-second observation continued, noting the power required on the turn, the sink rate, the approach attitude, the visibility of the runway. Now, low in the sky with the runway straight ahead, he was confident of his ability to touch down with accuracy.

'Stopping point opposite flying control,' he warned the tower as the P.1 came in to land smoothly. The brake test equipment van moved to intercept him, and the moment the wheels had stopped rolling, the brake temperature gauges were clamped against wheels and tyres.

He waited until the team had finished their recordings, and taxied back to the hangar. His head was tired and heavy with the strain of unremitting concentration, and he gulped a breath of fresh air gratefully as he stepped down from the cockpit.

The same group was there to greet him, but they were different men, released from the tension of anxiety and anticipation. Happy and enthusiastic, they crowded round, eager to know how the flight had gone. The 'slide-rule' evidence would come from the analysis of the recorders and cine-camera films which were being removed for developing. Meanwhile it was the human reaction that counted: what was it like?

In his flight caravan, conveniently small enough to exclude all but the three or four men directly concerned, Beamont discussed the flight in its technical aspects and gave them the answers they wanted to know; but when in the first quiet moment, he was to try to recall what the flight had been like in terms of sun and cloud, and where he had been, he could not do so. The flight had been eighteen hundred seconds of P.1, and the strangeness of a new aircraft that was inaugurating a fresh era in aviation. It was a half-hour out of time, in which every single detail of the P.1's performance had been indelibly registered upon the mind in chronological order. Beyond that there was absolutely nothing.

That night they celebrated with a party in a private room at a nearby pub. Ground crew, technicians, designers, pilot—they wore sports jackets and flannels instead of R.A.F. blue, but the gathering was otherwise little different from many a squadron party of the past.

They sang the same songs. Songs that Beamont had sung as a Hurricane pilot in the battles of France and Britain: as a Typhoon train-buster, virtually a test pilot in uniform, continuing the aircraft's development against tip-and-run raiders, and enemy communications: and with his Tempest Wing that held at bay the full fury of the first flying-bomb attacks.

Before he joined the informal celebration of the P.1's maiden flight, Roland Beamont telephoned his wife. Pat Beamont had known for a week that the flight was imminent because by rights her husband should have been on holiday with her and the four children at Chichester; but she knew too that she would hear nothing about the first flight until after the event. That was the one exception to her husband's custom of keeping her informed of every stage of his flying activities. He would never tell her in advance that he was going to make the first flight of a prototype. Once that milestone had been passed, however, he was eager for his wife to see the new aircraft fly, and share his enthusiasm for the machine.

Pat Beamont needed no second bidding. She promptly made arrangements for the care of the children, and drove to Boscombe for the P.1's second flight.

Her first reaction to the aircraft was one of horror. 'Surely he's not going to fly in that ugly-looking brute,' something protested within her. But as the P.1 took off and circled the aerodrome, her feelings changed to incredulous surprise. It was hard to reconcile her first impression with the beauty of the machine's appearance in flight.

The August morning had a wintry chill, and the group of technicians and representatives who had watched the take-off with her, quickly dispersed. Unwilling to miss anything, Pat stayed where she was on the perimeter, until finally the combination of cold and her practical commonsense triumphed. She turned for the shelter of her car, but Dunlop's chief test pilot, 'Digger' Coates-Preedy, who had been with her husband in the days of 609 Squadron and later with the Tempest wing, and a number of other observers had forestalled her. They were packed in the car with windows up and pipes alight, creating a comfortable fug.

With no wish to break up the stag party Pat Beamont stayed where she was and tried to settle down patiently to the tediousness of dragging minutes.

The P.1's ground crew eyed the lone figure of the waiting woman with sympathy. A spokesman left the group and approached her awkwardly. 'Ay, he's a grand man, your husband, Mrs. Beamont,' he said reassuringly.

Their solicitude touched her, but the knowledge that she was being observed, braced her to keep emotion within, and betray no outward sign of tension or excitement.

At length, for all the hovering of seconds in the time consciousness of watching and waiting, Pat Beamont grew convinced that the vigil must be nearing its end. Impatient though she was to know the time, she felt even more embarrassed at the thought of being seen looking at her watch and held back. And then she almost chuckled aloud. Taking great pains to avoid drawing her attention to the fact, the ground crew were surreptitiously glancing at their own watches.

Thirty-five minutes had gone, and though there was still another five minutes before he was due, the question mark began to rise in her throat: 'Where the hell's that plane?' She began to scan the sky.

She heard the distant whine of the jet first, before she saw the speck against the clouds. Still diffident at displaying emotion she choked back the exultant exclamation, 'There he is!'

The ground crew were also watching the speck in the sky; and again there was a light relief for Pat Beamont in the realization that they, too, were eager to point out the P.1's return, but hesitated for fear of mistaken recognition at that distance of the aircraft on which they had worked for so long.

But the P.1 it was, returning to do a couple of tight circuits for her benefit before landing.

Evading invitations they spent the evening alone. The bottle of wine may have helped, but by the time dinner was finished all the tension within had unwound in quiet bursts of half-supressed laughter. They were very happy.

The weather too was compensating for the unseasonal day. The grey overcast had dispersed, and the cold wind had died into the tranquillity of a perfect late summer evening.

'Let's go and see the evening hatch,' Beamont suggested.

They drove to Stockbridge, and leaning on the bridge over the river, watched the trout rise to the evening hatch of fly on the water. Long into the darkening dusk they stayed there, relaxed and content in the evening peace, taking their eyes from the water only to follow an occasional swallow skimming over the bridge.

Flying, fishing, sailing his fourteen-foot dinghy *Spey*, and bird watching—since childhood these had remained the enduring loves of this professional man of speed.

Often in a fine spring or summer evening when Pat had gone to fetch him from Warton aerodrome, he would have her instead drive to the far end of the runway which joins the estuary of the Ribble. There they would watch the waders, particularly the curlew with which, as a Southerner, he was making new acquaintance.

Whatever the species, there was always some trait or characteristic to be noted and admired.

'Look at that redshank,' he exclaimed. 'There's sweepback for you.' Together, they would watch the bird, one moment streaking through the air; the next banking and fully extending its wings in the turn, killing its speed in the instant and dropping on to a postage-stamp of mud.

At such an exhibition of flying Beamont never ceased to marvel. 'They know so much more about flight than we do,' he was always telling his wife.

Once when Pat had arrived early at the aerodrome with ideas for an evening's outing, she knew her plans had gone by the board immediately he stepped down from the aircraft.

'As I came in to land I saw an oyster catcher get up,' he greeted her enthusiastically. 'I've made a note of the spot.'

They found the nest, a hole in twisted grass, about twenty yards from the edge of the runway. Beamont eyed the eggs covetously. He had long since given up collecting birds' eggs, but he still had his cases of mounted eggs stowed away at home. There was no oyster catcher's amongst them.

'Don't you think,' he said at last, 'that Richard would like to have one of these?'

Beamont was not alone amongst his test pilot breed in this fascination for bird-watching. In 1902 when he attended a Central

Fighter Establishment convention near Blakeney, he rose early and went out to have a look for bird life for which the region is famous.

For half-an-hour it seemed that no one but he and the waders were abroad on the coastal marsh, until he espied against the sunrise the silhouette of a man motionless on the edge of the sea wall. He thought at first that it was someone out with a gun after some wildfowl, but he was mistaken.

It was John Derry, the first British test pilot to fly faster than the speed of sound.

'Hello John, what brings you out so early?' Beamont asked.

'Same as you Bee, I expect.' Derry replied. 'I've been keen on birds all my life.'

They walked back to the hotel for breakfast. Though they had known one another to nod to in the pilots' tent at Farnborough, it was only the previous week that they had really met. As a preliminary preparation for the P.1 project, Beamont had been given permission for a flight in the D.H.110.

When he arrived at De Havilland's, on the date arranged, weather had clamped down. Derry briefed him on the 110, and they spent the day together hanging about in the vain hope that the weather would clear. The trouble was that the aircraft was in the course of preparation for the approaching Society of British Aircraft Constructors' Show, so to avoid any further delay in the schedule it was decided that Beamont should postpone his flight until after the Farnborough week.

But at that year's Farnborough show, after being successfully demonstrated in supersonic dives, the D.H.110 broke up in mid-air, killing John Derry and his observer, Anthony Richards.

Beamont flew the P.1 faster than sound on its third flight, without knowing he had done so. He had taken off under cloud and followed the Avon down to its mouth. At the coast the cloud broke and he climbed to 30,000 feet over Bournemouth. He checked the engine instruments, fuel gauges and cabin pressure. Another glance to see that the auto recorder was still functioning and the cameras turning, and he settled down to further investigation of aileron control characteristics at high subsonic speed. If all went well that day, he would probably be able to try a supersonic run on the next flight.

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The surroundings faded from his consciousness. He had no eyes for anything but the machmeter, and the needle moving steadily forward, registering the gathering speed of the silver streak in the sky. Past mach 0·9, the needle moved, and man and machine were travelling at more than nine-tenths the speed of sound, at more than ten miles a minute. The P.1 was taking speed in its stride, flying beautifully with a perfection that entertained no doubts. Hand on throttles, ready to check at the slightest sign of vibration, he held the acceleration. And then, to his dismay, the machmeter needle stopped. Conscious of his fuel position he kept the P.1 for as long as he dare at full power, but there was still no change in the machmeter reading. The aircraft it seemed, had reached its maximum at that power, a maximum a long way short of the expected speed; for although the engines had not yet been developed to the full design power, it had been calculated that they would still be powerful enough to exceed the speed of sound in level flight with ease.

Throttling back to conserve his remaining fuel, Beamont turned for base in a perplexed, anxious frame of mind. Something apparently had gone radically wrong. Either the power had been hopelessly under-estimated, or the drag of the aircraft had risen beyond the calculations: and either case would involve a major hold-up in the project.

Next morning Atkin and Horsfield were already in the metal cubicle of an office inside the hangar, when Beamont arrived.

'We had better try another "level" at full power and see whether we can get any more speed out of it,' Beamont suggested gloomily. 'What do you think the trouble is: thrust or drag?'

Atkin seemed remarkably unperturbed. 'I don't think we need worry about the thrust, you know,' he said. 'And I'm not really concerned about the drag. You haven't seen yesterday's film yet, have you? It's only just come in.'

Beamont shook his head.

'Well let's have a look at it.'

Beamont studied the film recordings of his instrument readings—the indicated airspeed, the temperature, the altitude—and did a quick mental calculation. 'It must have been a lot faster than I thought. Why we must have——'

'Yes,' said Atkin, 'I think you were well past mach 1·0 all right.

It looks as if there is a considerable position and instrument error on the machmeter. It is probably exaggerated by the movement of the bow wave back across the static holes. I think if you had held the speed a bit longer until you were clear of the bow wave effect, you would have found the machmeter reading jump suddenly forward.'

The day was clear and visibility good. To confirm Atkin's explanation Beamont did a visual run on Boscombe, aiming the P.1 in a shallow dive towards the aerodrome so that if the pressure wave—which travels along the line of flight—did occur, it would be heard on the ground. Again, the machmeter stuck at the same point as on the previous day before eventually jumping as predicted. It was still registering subsonic speed, however, when the radio van called him. 'Eko to Tarnish One. We have just heard a shock wave. Was it you?'

'That is Roger,' Beamont acknowledged, and proceeded to remove all doubts about the P.1's capabilities, by exceeding mach 1·0 three times in level flight before returning.

The flight test programme continued. Flying the P.1 was now a routine of progressive stages that would take the aircraft gradually up to its design limits. Each flight had its own particular purpose, the exhaustive testing in turn of flying controls, systems, and engines. under a widening range of conditions. Each flight demanded the same ceaseless observation, the watching for the development of any unusual characteristics, for the intervention of any false note. If such occurred, the flight programme would mark time at that point. Again and again he would check and recheck, trying to interpret the true cause, but always on guard against jumping to conclusions that might draw a red herring across the trail, and lead to weeks of fruitless work. And when the corrective measure had been found and the modification applied, that too must be tested with the same thoroughness, before the next stage in the flight programme could be tackled.

Although a test pilot is ruled by the discipline of singleness of purpose, a freedom no longer found elsewhere in aviation is one of his cherished privileges. Since the war circumstances have strangled that sense of being free which was so much an essential part of the spirit of flying. Man can no longer take off into the sky and surrender to the fascination of its unconfined spaciousness.

He may no longer turn as the mood of the moment moves him, and without conscious thought, head where he will. The bonds of earth have reached out into the sky. Now he must work out and pass his exact route, turning points, and estimated times, and have the flight cleared before he leaves the ground. Once airborne he must follow track and time schedule like a tram or train. He must eschew all temptation to turn off into the by-lanes to 'chase the shouting wind', or 'join the tumbling mirth of sun-split clouds'. Only to the test pilot does some of this freedom of Britain's sky remain. He alone can fly with no more preconceived plan of distance or direction than the bare announcement, 'Test flight clear of airways up to one hour's duration'—or whatever the time may be.

Meanwhile at Chichester Pat Beamont saw the days of their holiday slip by with no sign of the head of the family.

'Any prototype always has to go in to be serviced for some small point or other after the first two or three flights,' her husband assured her, 'and then I'll be able to join you for a few days.'

But with the P.1 it just did not happen that way. Pat tried to view the situation with a philosophy born of long experience. It was all very well for her husband to declare that he had never known any aircraft progress so steadily, but then once he was absorbed in anything, nothing else ever mattered. Nothing could shake his singleness of purpose.

Delighted though she was that the project should be making such exceptional headway, it was difficult sometimes to stifle an inner plaint, which not for a moment did she mean seriously, of 'Oh, why can't the wretched thing go unserviceable?'

She had lived with the P.1 for a long time since that winter afternoon when a wooden mock-up of the cockpit, mounted on a *Queen Mary* (a long, articulated lorry) had been towed out on to the runway at Warton. Beamont had already been concerned in many earlier discussions with the design team on cockpit layout and comfort, controls and landing-speeds, but from that afternoon a mass of drawing-board lines and figures had taken tangible shape as the supersonic fighter-to-be.

There in the mock-up on the runway Beamont had checked the vision angles, and modifying the first estimates for the windscreens, chalked the dimensions in use today. From that moment the P.1—short for Pursuit 1, as the company were subsequently to designate the aircraft—had become his baby.

But when, in sections of wing, tail and fuselage, the machine had journeyed under tarpaulin on truck and trailer at a steady five miles an hour from the English Electric factory at Preston to Boscombe Down to have the benefit of the best flight test facilities in the country, the P.1 changed from the role of a baby into the demanding combination of master and mistress. A week of taxying tests had begun and suddenly the air was filled with a sense of urgency, as if all the months of steady evolution had gathered momentum to get the first flight over and finished.

Low speed taxying to test the brakes progressed to high-speed runs, first to nose-wheel lifting speed, which brought into action the backward operation of the control column, and then to a 'lift-off' speed that bounced the aircraft three feet above the runway.

Finally 'hops', in which the aircraft travelled some five hundred yards at a height of about ten feet, had enabled Beamont to test airborne the operation of the flying controls, and to check stability in landing conditions. These hops had given him the feel of the P.1 with air under the wheels, and had assured him that the aircraft would fly.

He felt no qualms whatever on that point, only the consuming impatience to do the first flight, to pass the landmark that signified the end of one stage and the start of the next. For although the mounting tension that had spread like an infection amongst everyone associated with the aircraft, suggested an approaching climax, the first flight was much more a beginning than a culmination. In Beamont's case it would be the first step to discovering everything that there was to know about the aircraft's behaviour in flight.

As chief test pilot he personally was responsible for all the initial prototype flying. He alone would make the first fifty or more flights before Peter Hillwood and Johnny Squier of the English Electric team, and then the Ministry of Supply's test pilots, joined in to assist with the development flying. Even the ultimate introduction of the P.1 into the R.A.F. would not complete Beamont's work with the aircraft. He would remain responsible for the prototype flying of each new variant. His first flight in the Canberra in May, 1948, for instance, had taken him through a series—still uncompleted—of eight marks, of which six were in service with the R.A.F. With the first flight of the P.1 he would be starting all over again.

The first flights brought no easing in pressure. In the absence of hold-ups for initial modifications, efforts were redoubled to clear the landing characteristics, cruising speed and range, so that the P.1 could fly to the company's aerodrome at Warton with the least possible delay.

Out of the three weeks he was supposed to have spent with his family Beamont managed one short week-end. Hopes of pottering round Chichester harbour had to be revised. *Spey*, which had served him from his school days, had filled with water.

'Very well,' said Beamont cheerfully. 'We'll have a picnic, but we'll do it properly. No thermos flasks and that sort of thing. We'll build a camp fire and brew some tea and cook sausages. Give you a break, darling. I'll see to everything.'

They drove to an isolated spot high on Goodwood downs, collected some twigs and got a fire going.

'Good show,' he said, filling a frying-pan with sausages. 'Better get the water boiling for the tea.'

He searched their stores. There was the canister of tea, the sugar, the bottle of milk, the kettle—empty. He looked round in surprise. 'What, no water, darling? Oh well we can eat the sausages anyway.'

When the sausages were cooked, Pat produced a thermos. 'I like to make sure of my cup of tea whatever happens,' she said.

The holiday ended, and Pat and the children returned home to St. Annes, leaving Beamont still at Boscombe. Some days later she was out shopping with the youngest child, Elizabeth, when a bang burst over the town.

Elizabeth started. 'What's that?' she exclaimed.

'That's Daddy,' answered Pat, hurrying the child into the car to drive home and wait for the telephone call.

Many were mystified by the explosion, for the phenomenon of supersonic bangs was not yet so familiar in the north as in the south. One other who knew at once, however, that the P.1 had returned to its base was the English Electric building manager. He was busy in the company's greenhouses at Lea and looked up with misgivings as the blast from the waves rattled the roofs.

It was soon apparent that the knowledge of pressure wave explosions gained from dives for a few seconds to supersonic speed in aircraft like the Hunter, D.H.110, and Swift was inadequate to meet the problem of aircraft designed to fly constantly at supersonic speed. In a dive the pressure wave continued along the path of the aircraft's heading; and it was therefore considered in some quarters that in straight and level, supersonic flight, the wave would travel parallel to the earth's surface, and no explosion would be heard on the ground below.

Trials with the P.1, however, soon proved that the wave—like the bow wave of a ship—travelled not only backwards along the flight path but downwards; and that from around 20,000 feet the wave generated by sustained supersonic flight was liable to be heard on the ground below like the rumble of a train over an area a few miles wide on either side of the aircraft's track.

Obviously the major part of the flight test programme of an aircraft designed for interception of hostile forces, flying faster than sound, had to be carried out at supersonic speed. Whilst questions in the House of Commons sought official restrictions on the generation of supersonic bangs Beamont went quietly ahead following his own policy of confining supersonic flight to isolated sea and land areas.

He had carried out more than fifty supersonic flights without any incident or anyone but himself and his own flight test team being aware of the fact, when a supersonic bang rattled across a wide coastal region of Lancashire one Sunday in February, 1955.

'That was a hefty shock wave, Bee,' Atkin said when he landed. 'There'll be complaints about that, you'll see.'

Beamont frowned. 'What are you talking about? I haven't done any supersonic testing near the place.'

'Well, the bang we heard was no Scotch mist.

Beamont was not only hurt, because of his punctilious concern to avoid disturbance any day of the week, but mystified. He had started his supersonic run some miles out to sea off Liverpool on a track that carried him parallel to the Lancashire coast.

At the time of the interruption of the church services in the Lytham St. Annes area he had been at least twenty-six miles away.

Ultimately the meteorological office pointed to a clue that might explain this freak effect. A blanket of warm air producing conditions of temperature inversion lay over the region in which he was flying. Normally after striking the sea, the pressure wave would have rebounded to disperse upwards into the atmosphere. In this case, however, the probability was that the wave had been deflected downwards again by the layer of warm air to spread its effect over a radius of twenty-six miles instead of the usual two or three.

The pilot experiences no reaction from the supersonic pressure waves that his aircraft generates. Beamont's consciousness of the speed of the P.1 in practical terms is the ease with which he can commute between Lancashire and Hampshire at well within twenty minutes from take-off to landing.

Beyond that, speed has little meaning; and although it is the purpose of much of today's research flying, the experimental test pilot finds his satisfaction elsewhere.

To Beamont the incomparable reward is the moments of insight that experimental test flying offers. There are rare moments inspiring a sense of great purpose, and more frequent moments of a feeling of immediate purpose. It may be when a new engine or new controls are to be tested; or the moment may come in the depths of frustration at finding the corrective measure for a fault. For no apparent reason the awareness is within him that the turning-point has been reached, that the pieces are falling into place, and that he and his team, no longer retreating, are going forward to the solution.

It is almost as though experimental test flying to him is a reflection of his own flying life from the beginning. Life has occasionally been difficult, beset by worries and obstructions which keep pushing him back against a wall. And then suddenly he would know that the wall behind him was solid. He could retreat no further. Regardless of outside opinion or the evidence against him, he knew that he had only to hang on long enough to attain his desire.

Without that almost bullet-headed trait of obstinacy as a boy, whose interests lay in the solitary pursuits of fishing and bird-watching, rather than in organized games of cricket and football, he would never have had the R.A.F. wings pinned on his tunic, let alone nursed the P.1 into the air. But to fly had been his goal from childhood, and that determined obstinacy saw to it that nothing should stand in the way.

PART ONE

FIGHTER PILOT

CHAPTER I

OBJECTIVE, FLYING

FLYING was already the objective. At his first meeting with the headmaster to discuss entering his son for Eastbourne College, Major Beamont emphasized that it was essentially the school's job to get Roland into the R.A.F. College, Cranwell.

The headmaster, Mr. G. V. Carey, demurred. The job was not solely theirs but at least, in part, the boy's, he suggested; and from what he had heard from Roland's preparatory school, entry into Cranwell was likely to involve a very tough struggle for all concerned.

Months later his fears were further confirmed when the results of the Common Entrance examination were received. Roland Prosper Beamont had reached a level appreciably below that required for admission into Eastbourne College. Something, however, made the headmaster hesitate. He had liked the boy's father, and the preparatory school report on Roland's character, as distinct from work, was most satisfactory. In the past Eastbourne had occasionally taken a chance on backward boys of promising character, who, apart from work had proved real winners, and so it was to be with Roland Beamont.

There was no personal enthusiasm for flying behind Major Beamont's attitude. He was being true to a long-standing pact he had made with his wife that once they were convinced that Roland had a definite bent, they would encourage it to the utmost.

The first opportunity of testing the extent of the boy's keenness arrived when a barnstorming pilot landed an Avro 504 to take up passengers for five-shilling flights from a near-by field.

In the evening Major Beamont walked across to collect his son who, except for the briefest appearance for a hastily swallowed lunch and tea, had switched his residence to the flying field. He found Roland standing with the pilot in front of the propeller of what looked to him a distinctly rickety old aeroplane.

The boy raced to greet him. 'Come and meet the pilot!' he shouted excitedly. 'He's a great friend of mine. He let me get into the cockpit.'

The nearer they approached, the more rickety the machine appeared to Major Beamont. He had never flown in his life, and nothing, he was convinced, would persuade him to set foot in that particular aeroplane.

That gave him the idea. The prospect of an actual flight should have a salutary effect in curbing his six-years-old son's enthusiasm and placing his interest in flying on a more realistic basis.

Roland heard his father's offer in wonder. 'Do you really mean it?' he exclaimed, and without waiting for an answer ran to the cockpit.

Major Beamont looked at the pilot in the faint hope of hearing him say that it was too late, or that he had insufficient petrol, or that there was something to prevent them from taking-off. But all the pilot said was. 'You are coming up too, sir?'

There was no way of backing out. If Roland were going, he had to go too. Major Beamont climbed reluctantly into the third seat.

The propeller swung, the engine roared into life, and the Avro 504 shook and rattled over the grass field and lifted into the air.

It is now, thought Major Beamont, perhaps prompted by his own feelings as the slipstream tore at his hair and buffeted the blood from his face, that Roland's enthusiasm will be declining and the boy will need a little moral support.

He reached forward and put his hands on Roland's shoulders. 'Don't be frightened!' he shouted.

The boy's shoulders wriggled impatiently. 'I'm not!' he called back indignantly. 'I like it. Take your hands off.'

That night Major Beamont confided to his wife that he was afraid Roland's interest in aviation looked more serious than they had imagined.

Preparatory school days opening up wider interests made no difference. Pocket money was still hoarded with almost miserly thoroughness for exclusive expenditure on flying books, material for model aeroplanes, and flights whenever possible. The birthday present of a bicycle became primarily the means of getting to Tangmere where, propped against the hedge, it served as a ladder on which the boy could stand and look over into the aerodrome from which he himself was to fly twelve years later during the Battle of Britain. Each day that passed made it more and more obvious that flying was no hobby: it was Roland Beamont's vocation, and Cranwell was to be the goal.

Meanwhile no opportunity of getting the boy into the air was missed; and each successive flight reaffirmed the Major's belief in the truth of his initial assertion to the headmaster of Eastbourne that his son was a 'born flier'. He did not therefore suffer gladly the headmaster's increasing conviction that Cranwell was likely to prove an elusive will o' the wisp for his son.

For personal reassurance after one of these discouraging interviews, Major Beamont asked a friend, Wing Commander Walkington, than commanding officer at Hornchurch, if he would size up the boy's reactions, and give him a frank opinion of whether or not he was likely to make a good pilot.

Walkington left nothing to chance. On the ground Major Beamont's stomach turned as he watched his son being dived, spun, looped and rolled and he wondered with misgivings what the youngster could possibly feel like.

The aircraft landed and taxied to the tarmac. Roland climbed out. Walkington dropped to the ground behind the boy and gave the Major a wink that left no doubt of his opinion that he had certainly put young Roland through it.

He turned to Roland. 'Well, how did you like that?'

'Marvellous, sir.'

The Wing Commander grinned. 'That's the spirit. But be honest. You wouldn't like to do it all over again, would you?'

Roland looked at him in disbelief. 'I'd love to, sir,' he said quickly. 'Can we really go up again?'

Walkington shrugged his shoulders. 'Hop in,' he said resignedly. 'We'll try a few advanced aerobatics.'

Again the aircraft landed, and Major Beamont studied his son. His first few steps were a trifle unsteady perhaps, and he was even more breathless than before. But breath was the only thing he lacked. His enthusiasm was greater than ever.

Walkington drew the father to one side for a private chat. 'I think you would be ill advised to put your foot down on this thing. The boy has it in him. He has the right temperament for a good pilot. Let him go ahead.'

After that, Major Beamont made no pretence of mincing his words. If Roland did not succeed in getting to Cranwell, he declared uncompromisingly, it would be the school's fault.

Actually it was nobody's fault.

'Roland Beamont,' said his headmaster, 'was one of those boys who was really never going to make much of a show with book work. But it was not for want of trying. I never once heard a complaint that he was idle or indeed at fault in any way whatsoever.'

Certainly the boy Beamont was unlikely to slack, because he was at all times so desperately anxious to get into the Air Force. And although his housemaster's frequent insistence that he was quite unfit to break stones, let alone get into Cranwell, may have failed to produce impossible heights of achievement, it did succeed in developing a stubborn streak which refused to admit defeat, and gave him a dogged determination to win through in spite of the odds.

At fifteen he sat the School Certificate examination, carrying no hopes at all from his masters, but himself clinging to the belief that he could not fail because so much depended upon passing. Unhappily his tutors' estimates proved accurate. He fared neither better nor worse than they had anticipated, and the margin of failure gave no promise that he would be successful another time.

Roland Beamont left his housemaster's study with depression in his heart. If he did not obtain the essential qualification of the School Certificate at the next sitting in six months' time, he would be over the age limit for Cranwell and the R.A.F. College would be ruled out in any case. The housemaster saw no sense in misleading the boy with groundless hopes and expectations. The best thing, he advised, was for Beamont to direct his thoughts towards something more within his capabilities.

Self-pity was not in the boy's nature. As he finally accepted the idea that Cranwell might not be for him, so with youthful confidence his mind turned to other ways of reaching his objective. There were short service commissions, and once he was in the R.A.F. he would take care to see short service developed into a permanency. Of course even for a short service commission there was still the bane of the School Certificate; but he would have so much more time in which to pass the examination.

He talked the situation over with his father. 'Well, Rolo,' said Major sympathetically. 'Let's see what a crammer can do.'

To Roland a crammer was a drowning man's straw. Perhaps a sense of finality drove him to prowess normally beyond himself. The following year he gained his School Certificate with four credits.

The day the results came through, he posted his application for a short service commission. His patience was not unduly tried. The shadow of jack-booted Hitler spreading over Europe had speeded up the expansion of the R.A.F. Within a month of his interview by the selection board, Roland Beamont was reporting to White Waltham to start training.

The struggle was by no means won. The classroom side of a pilot's training—the mathematics of navigation and the theory of flight—was likely to prove as difficult an obstacle as the first hurdle had been; but his ultimate success with School Certificate against all the prophecies had given Beamont a new assurance. His pass had been not marginal, but a comfortable one: proof indeed to justify his dogged belief that once he had made up his mind he could do a thing, he would succeed whatever anyone might say. He had reached a true diagnosis of his handicap. It lay not so much in capacity, but in the time it took him to grasp a subject, in his painstaking slowness which did, however, if given time, pay off in dividends of thoroughness.

He did not doubt his ability to reach the standard of the examinations he would have to face. His qualms lay in the fear that instruction might be too quick and leave him not enough time to learn. But it was with something of alarm that he found the same characteristics applying to practical flying as well.

After twelve hours' dual flying tuition Beamont was still in the opinion of his instructor, Selby Loundes, far from ready to go solo, and was sent for a check flight with the chief flying instructor. More often than not that flight meant a 'bowler hat' for the pupil who was slow to learn, but perhaps the chief flying instructor recognized the latent promise, and maybe he was infected by Beamont's insistent conviction that he would be able to fly if given time. Beamont was reprieved and granted an extension of flying tuition.

Another three hours' dual left the instructor scratching his head. Fifteen hours: ninety-nine out of a hundred pupils would have been washed out long before.

'But I know I can fly the thing,' Beamont pleaded. 'Just let me try, sir.'

'All right,' assented Loundes, for once taking a chance. 'Off you go.'

Alone in the Tiger Moth with no instructor watching him, warning him, correcting him, Beamont felt happy and at home in the air. There was no need to try so hard to prove himself to the front seat passenger. He could concentrate and get on with flying the aeroplane. The brake was off his progress.

There was still the last hurdle of the wings examination, which he faced six months later at the advanced training school in Scotland, feeling depressed in the aftermath of a bout of influenza, and failed. How far the influenza was a misfortune affecting the result, and how far it was the intervention of a friendly destiny that knew her protégé needed more time, it is difficult to say. At least the illness provided sufficient excuse for the board to allow him to sit the examination again.

Behind the wings pinned on his tunic was a consistent history of second attempts, which had, however, laid a solid foundation of thoroughness and earned him the comparatively rare flying assessment of 'exceptional'. From that moment he was never to look back.

CHAPTER II

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

IN not many households can the coincidence of father and son posted overseas on the same day by the Army and Air Force have been repeated. On a raw, murky November morning Pilot Officer Beamont and his father, called back to the army as a lieutenant-colonel, travelled together to London on the first leg of their journey to the war in France. They parted at Victoria station, and by the time Roland Beamont reached Hendon sun was dispersing the morning fog. Promptly at 10 a.m. the 'Amiens Express', a Rapide on ferry service between England and France, took-off, climbing away from meadows glittering with frost and above the haze in which barrage balloons floated over London.

It was country that Beamont knew well. The familiarity of the landmarks slipping astern brought their own pangs of nostalgia. Windsor Castle, the reassuring anchor and signpost of the early solo days when it was so easy to feel lost out of sight of White Waltham aerodrome. The distinctive ribbon of the Guildford by-pass, normally seen in close up, streaming beneath an ancient M.G. of fire engine hue. The vale of Arun, the South Downs, the Cathedral spire of Chichester, no longer the city of gloom that he had left three hours earlier, but veiled in a sun-warmed mist of peaceful enchantment.

Following the Sussex coastline the Rapide turned over Beachy Head, giving him a farewell glimpse of Eastbourne and a reminder of his struggle to get into the Air Force. Doubts pricked him. His impetuous longing for the first taste of action waned momentarily in a realistic appraisal of his own inexperience. He had flown Hurricanes for fifteen hours. Was that enough? Enough to fly the aircraft competently, yes; but to fly her as a weapon of war with the alternative of destroying or being destroyed? For a month he had learned tactics and practised dog-fights, but it was difficult to look upon them as other than competitive sport.

Qualms vanished as the Rapide crossed the French coast at Le Treport and he looked down excitedly for his first sight of foreign soil. What he had expected to see, he did not really know, but it was certainly not the depressing brown dreariness of mile after mile of muddy beet fields, varied by an occasional farmhouse and clusters of drab cottages and barns.

A rainstorm greeted him on the last stage of the journey to Seclin, the 87 Squadron base on the outskirts of Lille. The one cheering sight was the line-up of the Hurricanes of 87 and 85 Squadrons in front of the hangars—the 'opportunity boys', ready on the off chance that the Hun might come over. Otherwise closer acquaintance only increased the gloom that the dismal scene inspired on the approach to land.

Between the hangars a muddy road led to a rickety wooden shack with a loose door hanging on broken hinges. Cinders strewn round the entrance strove vainly to keep out mud from the bare concrete floor.

'This is the mess, sir,' the batman announced.

Vaguely through the fug of smoke billowing from two brick fireplaces which did not noticeably raise the temperature, Beamont made out five cane chairs and a broken-down couch littered with dog-eared periodicals. The one touch of glamour that betrayed the hut as a fighter squadron mess was the piece of aircraft stamped with a huge black cross, and forming an imposing background to a bar in one corner.

'After all,' Beamont consoled himself, 'It's not a holiday. We are here to fly.'

The C.O. quickly put him right on that point. 'Ha,' he welcomed him. 'Another Ops B,' and assigned Beamont to a chair at a desk in the station Operations room with two telephones and a large map.

It was still the era of the phoney war. There was little call yet for either defensive or offensive air activity, and endless icy rain which froze where it touched, grounded the squadrons for days on end.

Life was a monotonous morass of mud and cold with long dreary days and nights of watchkeeping in the Operations room preferable because of its lukewarm fug, to off-duty periods in the draughty, unheated, barrack huts with bare stone floor and concrete walls. Once in the middle of December Beamont's morale was lifted by a week-end detachment to Le Touquet on leave-boat security patrols across the Channel, but generally any flying required was the prerogative of the senior, experienced pilots. Regularly, huddled together over a primus on which they brewed strong cocoa, Beamont and half a dozen other pilots of his own vintage would indignantly discuss the vicious circle of the situation. Only experienced pilots flew regularly, and the less experienced the pilot was, the less chance he seemed to have of increasing his experience. At the rate they were going they would never get into the air.

They need not have worried. But before the storm of the Luftwaffe was unleashed they had to contend with the exceptional bitterness of that first winter of the war. Mud gave way to snow, and still falling temperatures coated the huts with sheets of ice.

Floundering under the weight of sweaters and flying clothes they sought in vain to smother the chill in their shivering bones. Sickness became prevalent and towards the end of January the two squadrons sharing the base could have mustered no more than nine pilots between them had a state of readiness been called.

Succumbing to a high fever Beamont was transferred to the base hospital at Dieppe. When the time for his discharge approached, he found to his dismay that having been absent more than fourteen days he was off squadron strength, and was therefore to be sent to a pilots' pool at Le Mans to await reposting.

In desperation Beamont telephoned his father who was stationed in the R.A.O.C. at Douai.

'I'm at Dieppe hospital with one of the Eighty-seven boys and we are in a jam,' he announced. 'They won't let us go back to the squadron, but are posting us to a pool at Le Mans. Say no, if you can't, but do you think you could send a car to pick us up and take us back to Lille? It would have to be done at once because we are due to leave here tomorrow.'

Colonel Beamont cleared his throat to give himself time to think. He had long ago told his son to rely upon him for help if he were ever in any trouble, no matter what, but he had never envisaged a Service situation such as this. As a senior officer it was his duty to encourage junior officers to discipline and the observance of orders and regulations. Even as he put that aspect to the back of his mind, he was thinking of the hundred miles drive over treacherous ice-bound roads which from current weather reports, might well prove impassable. The journey could never be justified. He would have to undertake it on his own authority knowing that if things came to the worst he would face a court martial on charges of absenting himself from duty and misuse of W.D. transport and petrol. The parent in him won.

'It's a bit tricky old chap,' he said, 'but I'll see what can be done. If I can manage it I'll be with you about four this afternoon.'

The roads were as bad as the colonel had feared. At the slightest chance the car slithered over the glassy ice in gay abandon. There were no chains and the makeshift ropes round the wheels gave ineffective hold. With each turn and bend the car skidded to all points of the compass before the driver could regain control and continue towards Dieppe. Once they halted broadside against a lamp post, and once they spun off the road and came to rest overhanging the bank of a canal.

'It only needs a crack-up,' ruminated the colonel, 'for the fat to be really in the fire.'

Generous though his time estimate had been, they were an hour late by the time they reached the hospital.

'Good show, D,' Beamont congratulated his father as he stowed his kit into the car. 'Didn't think you were going to make it. By the way,' he added genially, 'just to keep the record straight in case we are picked up, you're kidnapping us, you know?'

'Oh I am, am I?' queried Colonel Beamont lugubriously. Still he decided, what did one more potential count at his court martial matter?

It was midnight when they at last reached Douai, and Beamont found a bed at the house where his father was billeted. Next day he reported to the station adjutant.

'How did you get here?' the adjutant wanted to know.

'Hitch-hiked,' answered Beamont.

'A bit irregular, but as you are here you had better stay, I suppose,' the adjutant decided. 'See the M.O. He'll probably fix you up with some sick leave first.'

Beamont returned from his fourteen days' leave in England to find the squadron moving to Le Touquet. The move brought plenty of flying on leave-boat patrols from dawn to dusk, but still never a sight of an enemy aircraft. Five months he had been with the squadron without a taste of action. And then late one afternoon towards the end of March when low cloud and rain were making flying prospects unlikely, the telephone interrupted the beginnings of a party. 'Two aircraft to patrol Bercq above cloud,' Operations announced. 'A bandit plotted in the vicinity.'

Beamont and John Cock rushed for their aircraft. He heard Cock's engine roar to life and saw the Hurricane taxying out into the field, but his own refused to start.

Cursing he ran to another machine which a flight mechanic was starting up in readiness and climbed against driving rain in the direction taken by Cock. He broke cloud at 9,000 feet into brilliant sunshine which set his eyes blinking as he searched the sky. An unmistakable speck ahead had him cramming on boost and excitedly chasing in pursuit until it grew into the familiar lines of Cock's Hurricane. Joining forces they headed back east, following instructions on the radio telephone as Operations tried to vector them on to the enemy.

The glimmer of sun thrown back at him by the dazzling white sheet of cloud layer hurt his eyes and made searching a strain. Sight assumed a pinkish tinge, and it was moments after his eyes first lit on the pale green under-surface of a twin-engined aeroplane, before the significance registered. She was flying on a parallel heading 3,000 feet above them and the swept back elliptical wings with forward engine nacelles left no doubt about her identification as a Heinkel 111. Throttles wide open, the two Hurricanes rose on their tails in eagerness to close the range. But the German had spotted them, and streams of black smoke gushed from the Heinkel's exhaust as he too thrust open his throttle.

The chase was on, climbing up the sky, and by 17,000 feet the distance had narrowed to 600 yards. The Heinkel was almost within range, and already an obviously frightened rear gunner was letting loose wild bursts of tracer. With difficulty Beamont fought the almost irresistible temptation to blaze away in return. Excitement surged within him. He was in action at last. This is what he had joined for, and trained for, and waited for so endlessly. He had outclimbed Cock and this was going to be his own unaided Hun. Just a few moments more, and then the Heinkel would be within range of his eight machine-guns.

And then interest in shooting down the Heinkel waned suddenly. He could see the Heinkel, could see nothing but the Heinkel in a small patch of dark blue sky; but it no longer seemed to matter. A dulled will pricked him to a last effort to shake off an overwhelming lassitude and concentrate upon the job in hand. The dark blue sky was turning to purple and an unbearable weight pressed upon him.

The Heinkel had disappeared. He wondered vaguely why and where; and through a confusion of senses, the thought dinned into his brain that he was going to spin. For a brief instant he knew that he was going to spin, but not even that seemed to matter very much.

When he regained consciousness he was at 11,000 feet in an inverted dive with the needle of the airspeed indicator right off the dial. Oxygen, his returning wits prompted him quickly; he had blacked out at 23,000 feet through lack of oxygen. He pulled the Hurricane out of the dive and checked for the cause of the stoppage. That took no time at all. The loose end of the oxygen tube was dangling from his mask. In his haste to take-off he had forgotten to connect with the oxygen supply.

Disconsolately he called up base hoping against hope that they might be able to direct him back to the fight, but there was no reply. The chase had taken him outside the range of the radio telephone. Feeling wretched, he descended through the cloud to find his way home.

Beamont was the first to land. Sadly he told his story and faced the flight commander's asperity and general leg-pulling. And it was not until Cock returned with the news that he had caught and shot down the Heinkel in flames that the ragging lost its sting in the celebrations that evening.

The interlude of false peace, of isolated action ended on

April 28 1940, when the squadron moved down the Maginot Line to Senon to patrol across the frontier. The sector was reputed to be populated with Messerschmitts, but none greeted them. Already the prophets were forecasting that the war would drift into a prolonged stalemate of inactivity which neither side would risk disturbing. But a week later a violent explosion at dawn shook the squadron tents.

Cursing an attack of dysentery which kept him on the ground, Beamont watched the rest of the squadron pull their flying kit over pyjamas as they ran for their Hurricanes. The blitzkrieg had arrived.

The same morning, May 8, the squadrons were ordered urgently to the Belgium frontier. It was five days, however, before the medical officer would allow Beamont to fly, and the chance to redeem his misfortune with the He.111 arrived.

He was one of nine Hurricanes patrolling the Louvaine—Brussels area when a burst of anti-aircraft fire signalled the presence of a formation of Dornier 17s. Switching on sights and setting the guns to fire, the Hurricanes raced line astern for the enemy bombers which were hurriedly trying to form a defensive circle. Before they could do so the Hurricanes were in their midst and the air was a cat's cradle of tracer ropes. Without conscious thought Beamont found himself firing furiously at a Do.17 which had somehow arrived in his sights.

He broke off quickly as another Hurricane cut into the attack, and looked up to see an Me. 110 coming down on him. He pulled back the stick and fired a quick burst as it flashed by, but there was no longer time for singling out an individual target. The Me.110 was the first of a whole umbrella that had been screening the Dornier 17s and was now dropping on to the Hurricanes.

Beamont was in a whirl of turning, twisting, diving, climbing aircraft. Whatever his move, wherever he attacked, there was always another enemy aircraft on his tail to call check. In desperation he swung the Hurricane into a tight turn until the blood swam into his eyes and he could stand it no longer. To his surprise he came out of the turn to find a Dornier in front of him. Vehemently he pressed the firing button, holding his thumb on it in a long burst until first one engine stopped, and then the other began streaming smoke and the Dornier fell out of the sky.

There was no time for exultation at his first kill. That last deadly burst ended abruptly of its own accord. He was out of ammunition in a sky still seething with hostile aircraft.

Quickly he heeled over in a dive for the ground. Although the battle had swung well behind enemy lines there seemed to be more future in hedge-hopping back to the Brussels area than running for it at altitude.

The ease with which Beamont seemed to drop out of the battle was too good to be true. His self-congratulation on the success of the manoeuvre was abruptly cut short by flickers of tracer over the wing as he levelled out of the dive at tree-top height. Sitting above and behind him was a Do.17. He cursed silently. The fighter pilot's dream of a single unescorted bomber in a cloudless sky, and he was out of ammunition!

At first he was more concerned at the knowledge that the Dornier must escape unharmed than he was with the threat to himself. But the bomber, he quickly discovered, was in the hands of an expert who was making the most of his height advantage to keep the Dornier flying every bit as fast as the Hurricane. Try as he would Beamont could not get away.

Round and round the tree-tops they chased, the Dornier taking full advantage of the knowledge that his adversary was out of ammunition, and almost mocking him with the sitting target that it presented to his empty guns. Beamont was caught in a vicious circle. Attempts to pull away from the front guns brought him into line of fire from the rear. Finally, taking a chance against the rear gunner's aim, he increased his rate of turn until he was well behind the enemy's tail and broke circle into an outside turn. Before the Dornier had time to recover and catch up, he had made good his escape.

The tempo of life in the dispersal, if such a name may be given to the facilities of one field telephone and a ditch providing somewhat damp and dubious air raid cover, was accelerating. Five and six times a day the curt message, 'Air raid warning red. All aircraft off the ground,' sent pilots racing for their machines to take-off into skies milling with aircraft and peppered with tracers and flak. Skies in which black mushrooms of anti-aircraft shell bursts, the white puff of opening parachute silk and the flaming, smoking torch of an aircraft in its final dive, were growing as familiar as the cloud formations.

Caught up in a whirl of urgency, there was no time to think; no time to count the opposition, no time to question the cost. Bomber formations were there to be broken, broken up quickly by darting straight at their very heart before the escorting fighters dropped down into the mêlée.

Eighteen hours a day, interrupted only by spasmodic shifts for meals, pilots stood at readiness by their machines, took-off, fought, landed, took-off again. Fatigue was a part of living. Night brought three or four hours' sleep which failed to assuage need but provided a sufficient drug to keep one going as each new day arrived at 3.30 a.m. with the batman's invariable 'Lovely morning, sir' and the distant thudding of the dawn barrages. It was a rehearsal for the Battle of Britain; but without the satisfying encouragement of the knowledge that successes in the air were bringing victory in battle. For although they braked and delayed the outnumbering hordes of the Luftwaffe, the Wehrmacht was advancing unpleasantly fast, and at the end of the week of incessant fighting the order was given for immediate withdrawal to Merville. It had been a week in which 87 Squadron's total of confirmed victories had passed fifty, but not without the cost of nine pilots.

There were Mackworth and Joyce who on their own had attacked a large formation of 110s that was strafing an ambulance train. (Joyce later turned up in hospital without a leg). Messerschmitts had claimed another pilot who died in hospital asking that the bandages should be taken off his eyes because he could not see. He had no eyes. On his first patrol Jarvis, still far from trained, had run into a pack of 110s. Pryce and Sanders, the ferry pilots who had brought new Hurricanes, had been equally unlucky. They stayed to fly them and disappeared on their first show. Jack had gone never to be heard again; and an identity bracelet delivered by Royal Engineers confirmed the end of Taffy Edwards in flames in the fight with the 110s during the battle on Louvain. Jeffreys had been shot down and was in hospital with injuries; and Miller was in hospital with burns.

It was hard to believe that these men—under twenty-one, most of them—would no longer be flying with the squadron by day and drinking at parties at night, Beamont mused, as he drove in the M.O.'s car with the adjutant along roads lined with cars abandoned through lack of petrol and crowded with a trudging stream of despairing refugees.

By the time they reached Merville the air party was already settled in most of the billets near the dispersal, and unable to find accommodation, Beamont motored back into the town.

The door of the first house he tried was unlocked. No one answered his summons so he walked upstairs to a bedroom. He pulled off his boots and slid into the almost forgotten luxury of sheets. With a feeling of incredible peace and well-being he was asleep.

Laughter awakened him. Through half closed eyes he discovered a girl standing at the foot of the bed. She was pretty enough to be part of a dream, but this was no dream. The sun was shining through the open window and she was wanting to know what he was doing in her bed.

'Sleeping,' said Beamont.

She smiled and upbraided him good-humouredly for his laziness. Did he not know it was past nine o'clock?

Beamont grinned. 'I'm just leaving.'

'Oh, it does not matter,' she assured him quickly, 'my family have evacuated. I am just collecting as much as I can.'

News in the officers' club which was being used as temporary squadron headquarters left little appetite for breakfast. Arras, Cambrai and Amiens had fallen. The enemy were on their way up the Somme, and spreading fanwise towards Merville. Already 87 Squadron had been in action that morning and had shot down a Ju.88.

Feeling guilty at over-sleeping Beamont gulped his coffee and hurried to the aerodrome to relieve Cock for breakfast. Aircraft were taking off on patrol and returning all morning, but Beamont's only call was a low strafing attack on columns south of Arras.

Lying in the hot sun he thought of the Huns in their old haunts in Glicy. At that moment the Luftwaffe were probably occupying their old dispersal and flight offices. Was it this thought and the act of withdrawal that was charging the air with such tension that morning? The atmosphere seemed electrified with a sense of mounting climax.

Spasmodic bursts of machine-gun fire were echoing from the distance on the far side of the aerodrome. Surely the Hun could not be so close as that? The idea was ridiculous. But it was true. An advanced motorized column was engaged in a local action five miles away.

Lazily Beamont watched a Hurricane returning from patrol enter the circuit. Next moment he was on his feet. The Hurricane was already lowering its wheels when a 110 streaked across the aerodrome. A sharp crackle from its guns, a glint of tracer, and it was gone, leaving the Hurricane diving into the field with a great spout of flame and smoke.

The angry desire to chase after the destroyer had to be smothered. Pursuit would have been futile. There was not a chance of catching the Hun; and in any case they were bound there at readiness by their machines waiting for the next summons that would put them to the best use against the Luftwaffe's overwhelming numbers.

For the first time since that hectic week of blitzkrieg had begun, anticipation of the next patrol acquired a sense of foreboding. It was impossible to hope to survive. The end could only be a matter of time. And yet that did not seem to matter very much. The stakes were too great, dwarfing any values that the individual attached to his own life.

Slowly passing the time, Beamont wandered along the line of aircraft, and came upon his squadron commander.

'Oh, Bee,' said Dewar. 'Feel like a rest? A K.L.M. Douglas is going back at 12.30. Either you or Cock can go on it. You had better draw lots.' He laughed at the incredulous expression that had spread over Beamont's face. 'Yes, England, Bee. You know, London.'

Beamont gaped. The chance of a rest from all the turmoil, the possibility of seeing England again, of being on the way within half an hour. All this to be decided on the toss of a coin.

Beamont won the toss, and was off at once racing to meet the D.C.3 as it taxied across the field with its cargo of injured and battle-scarred fighter pilots. Amongst the passengers Beamont alone seemed unscathed.

Take-off in ten minutes, the crew told him. There was no time to collect any kit, not even his flying helmet from the dispersal. But what did it matter? He was headed back for England. A peaceful, sunlit, England in which uniform was the exception rather than the rule. An England with all the semblance of peacetime prosperity, her shops and streets packed with crowds oblivious to war and the seriousness of the threat to themselves.

'Messerschmitt weather.' The thought recurred to him as he sat unshaven and in dirty overalls in the train that was taking him past sunlit Sussex woods and meadows to Chichester. But even that last memory of the Continent was for the time being put quickly behind him. From habit he stuck the stem of an empty pipe comfortingly between his teeth.

A voice interrupted his reverie. 'Young man,' said an elderly lady sharply. 'Can't you read? This is a "No smoking" compartment.'

CHAPTER III

THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

THE mud of the Continent had been scraped off for the last time for four years. At the end of his forty-eight hours' leave Beamont was ordered to report to Church Fenton where 87 Squadron was in the throes of reforming, trying generally to straighten up its affairs and check who was back from France, and who was missing.

Life was a lazy existence of flying for pleasure and homely parties on beer in English pubs, so different from drinking in the cafés of France. Within a week the squadron was operational again but 'readiness' meant little more than attempts to set up aerodrome circuit records in motor races round the perimeter. In the still unshattered peace of England the war-weariness of those last overwrought days of the Battle of France drained from them.

From Church Fenton the squadron moved to Exeter. Convoy patrols and sorties after German reconnaissance machines which came over whenever there was sufficient cloud to afford cover, provided plenty of flying. It was not, however, until July 10 that contact with the enemy was made over England.

Three Hurricanes from B Flight were on a routine patrol over Portland when the leader, S/L. Dewar, reported bandits to Control.

'How many?' asked Control.

'I can see twelve, no twenty. fifty—oh hundreds of the bastards,' he answered.

He had no time to say more. The sky was darkening with Ju.87s, into which the small vee of three Hurricanes was speeding like an arrowhead. Dewar shot down two of the bombers, and F/O. Jay and F/Sgt. Badger one each, and they returned unscathed to base.

The war was on again. It was the prelude to the Battle of Britain, the beginning of activity against the south-coast towns with the intention of testing and trying to reduce the strength of the R.A.F. in readiness for invasion.

Beamont's disappointment at picking that particular day for his leave and missing the fun was soon mollified. With Voase-Jeff and Mitchell he was climbing towards the Bristol Channel in the grey dawn of July 24 when Control reported a bandit in the vicinity. They searched the sky. Beamont looked down through the broken cloud on the coast-line of Lundy Island, and then Mitchell waggled his wings and pointed below to starboard. In a cleft between the billowing cumulus clouds, tinged with the first orange glow of sunrise, was the black silhouette of a twin-engined aircraft.

Voase-Jeff and Mitchell peeled off towards the gap in the clouds. but noting the enemy's heading Beamont dived into cloud to port in the hope of cutting him off. Breaking cloud he found two Spitfires worrying a Ju.88. The other Hurricanes were well behind to port.

'The leading Spitfire was attacking as I arrived,' Beamont wrote at the time, 'but broke away leaving me some two hundred yards astern of the 88, exchanging burst for burst with the rear gunner. Presently he stopped firing. A thin stream of smoke began to pour from the fuselage, and the Hun went down in a gentle dive towards Tiverton.

'We crossed the cliffs at a hundred feet, and just when it seemed certain that no one could get out, a puff of white appeared from the top of his fuselage and I nearly ran into a parachute. The next moment the 88 hit the ground at some 150 m.p.h., slid across a field, through a hedge, over a road into another field, slewed around, broke its back and caught fire. I shot over the top, throttled right back and circled round the burning wreck looking for signs of life. The rear gunner had baled out at too low an altitude and lay two fields away, where he had swung down on the end of his opened parachute, which was stretched across the grass.

'On the third circuit I was amazed to find three men beside the crash, one sitting, one standing and the other either dead or unconscious. Presently, an ancient Morris came swaying up the road and the local Home Guard captured the half-dead Germans. And so I returned to breakfast with a considerably stimulated appetite.'

August brought a heat wave and news of heavy fighting over Kent which kept the hours of stand-by at the Flights full of excited anticipation. But when the storm did break Beamont, for the second time, had chosen the wrong day off. He returned to find that B Flight had been in the thick of it.

Johnny Dewar, MacLure, and Cock had been shot down but all were safe. Dewar and MacLure had crash-landed at Warmwell and Cock had baled out over the sea and swam ashore minus his trousers, to the great amusement of Dennis David who maintained a patrol over him. On the credit side the flight had destroyed nine enemy aircraft, all of which were shot down again many times that night in the bar of the local whilst the pilots filled up on pints supplied by enthusiastic civilians.

Next morning at 6.30 a.m. the first of the 'panic' calls sent all aircraft scrambling for the Portsmouth area, but bad luck was still dogging Beamont. His aircraft was slow in starting and by the time he did take off the rest of the squadron were specks against the sunrise.

Portland, Bournemouth and Southampton passed beneath him, and the repetition on the radio, 'One hundred plus approaching Spithead from the south-west,' did nothing to ease his sense of loneliness as he trailed far behind the others.

He reached Portsmouth to find the battle was over. B Flight, however, had been in time to give chase to a Ju.88 which they had put into the sea fifty miles from the coast. But F/Lt. Dick Glyde, who only two days before had had a miraculous escape when a bullet shattered the cockpit hood an inch from his head, did not return. As the section reformed with Dewar leading they noticed white smoke coming from Glyde's machine. Next time they looked round he was no longer there.

Beamont returned to spend the morning at cockpit readiness whilst 213 Squadron went off to meet a big attack over Portland. That afternoon Beamont's flight was relieved.

'Bet you any money there will be another big show this afternoon just because I won't be on it,' he declared. He was right. This time Weymouth was the target, and Voase-Jeff, the flight commander, was to miss his wedding by ten days as he went down in flames into the sea.

Beamont's grouse that he seemed destined to be left out of the big air battles was not to last long. The next day was August 15, 1940.

The morning passed slowly with B Flight lying in the sun and trying to quell the feeling of impatience and frustration, fostered by news from everywhere of heavy air battles. The aerodrome was seething with aircraft taking off and returning and taking off again, but B Flight were no part of it.

In the afternoon it was the same story. 213 Squadron were away on a job and 87 Squadron's A Flight was engaged somewhere else.

At 3.30 p.m. the warning came: 'Stand-by. Aircraft massing over Cherbourg.'

Beamont brightened as he pulled a Mae-West over his shirt. Only B Flight, which could muster no more than five serviceable aircraft, was left on the station. If there were work to be done, he reckoned hopefully, this time it could not pass him by. He was right. In a contemporary diary he kept of some of his combats he recorded afterwards:

> At 4.15 p.m. the 'Ops' bell rang. 'One hundred and twenty plus approaching Warmwell from the South. Good luck chaps!' said a kindly voice. Immediately there was the usual stampede of begoggled pilots, half naked crews and Sam, David's bull terrier, for the aircraft. A blackguard rush down the field, and taking up formation B Flight's five Hurricanes climbed eastwards under the glaring August sun.
>
> At Lyme Regis at some 12,000 feet, we began to weave, searching the sky above and behind. And then, out to starboard there appeared what could best be described as a gigantic swarm of bees, all revolving round each other in one fantastic spiral from 8,000 feet up to 14,000 feet. Swinging round towards them, Shovel [Squadron Leader Lovel Greig], the C.O. opened his throttle wide and we all packed in closely behind him. Trevor to the left, myself level with him on the right, and Mitch and David close behind.

As the distance closed, the swarm ahead developed into a great formation of Ju.87s, some fifty to sixty strong flying a defensive circle in 'Sections Astern', with a close escort of twice their number of Me.110s. Above these appeared to be another large formation of Me.109s.

Shovel called 'Tally ho' over the r/t. I looked across at Mitch, and he grinned and gave a 'thumbs up'. Next moment Shovel waggled his wings and we were diving into the brown.

At about 500 feet above the leading squadron, we peeled off to port right into the middle of the swarm which looked like some immense spiral staircase. Half rolling I found a section of Ju.87s coming into my sights, and the owner of all the tracers that were flashing round me, appeared suddenly from right under my nose, his guns blazing hard.

I was diving vertically whilst the Me.110 was climbing up at the same angle. At the crucial moment he stalled right across my bows and I squirted a good burst into his belly from such a point blank range that the bullets could be seen striking and buckling the plating of his wings and fuselage. A flash of flame and a puff of smoke, and I jammed the stick forward in time to avoid colliding with him.

This had taken some five seconds from start to finish, and I was still in the top of the vicious circle, and going down fast. I did not have to look for another target. Another 110 was closing from below and ahead, firing as he came. His shooting was much better than the first. Feathery grey lines came slanting past the cockpit on both sides, so close in fact, that I remember noting the line of tracer between myself and the roundel on the port wing.

I had more time than on the previous attack, and saw my tracers intersecting in the bead of the reflector sight which I held dead on the oncoming Hun. Holding our courses to the last minute, we flashed past each other less than twenty feet apart at a combined speed of over 400 m.p.h. I caught a glimpse of a puff of white, and turning on the ailerons, I looked up. The Me. was on its back and a parachute was opening behind it. Number two!

The air was thick with aircraft. Dark grey Ju.87s, dark green Me.110s with sky-blue bellies, and pale green and silver 109s—all emblazoned with black crosses.

Our attack had upset the whole organization. It was no longer a well-ordered armada filling the sky, tier upon tier, but a confused dog-fight stretching from Portland to Dorchester, Warmwell to Lyme Regis. By now I was nearing the bottom of the scrap. Suddenly a single Ju.87 appeared in the windscreen. Hauling everything back, I fired my last round at him, and then levelled off at some 400 m.p.h. nearly blacking out in the process.

I looked round. Out of the smoke left by flamers on all sides, a 110 flashed past on its back with no tail. Some distance away another was frantically trying to escape the attentions of two Hurricanes who were rapidly sealing its fate.

Then, a familiar criss-cross of grey pencil lines across the sky in my immediate vicinity brought home the fact that a number of Me.109s were dropping from the heavens, and I was in the way—with no ammunition.

I drove the already ill-used kite into another 400 m.p.h. aileron turn, and shot into a billowing cumulus cloud upside down one jump ahead of the 109s.

The cloud base was 4,000 feet. Weymouth appeared below, and both the Bay and the sea off Chesil Bank were dotted with yellow circles where aircraft had made their last land-falls.

The tension over, I suddenly felt very hot. My tunic was dark with perspiration. Opening the hood, I headed down the coast for home and glanced at my watch. I had been in the air for twenty-five minutes.

Mitchell who had destroyed two, was already at base when Beamont arrived. Together they waited, watching 213 Squadron return. After a quarter-of-an-hour a beautiful roll heralded the return of David claiming two-and-a-half victories. Later Jay telephoned from Weymouth police station. He had crashed on the beach but was unharmed, and had destroyed two of the enemy before himself being shot down. Still they waited, but of Lovel-Greig, the C.O., there never was to be any news.

The Battle of Britain was in the flush of its first phase, but the concentration of the attacks was narrowing to the region south-east of a line from Portsmouth to Gravesend, the area planned as the first objective of German invasion under the Operation Sea Lion. For the squadrons at Exeter there was a lull. The Operations telephone still reiterated monotonously, 'Stand-by. Aircraft massing over Cherbourg', and sent flights racing into the air on interceptions that more often than not proved fruitless.

Nevertheless it was with not very good grace that B Flight found itself drawn out of the fray for a week of night-flying in Gloucestershire whilst A Flight were left to collect whatever glory there might be.

Beamont finished the week with thirty-six hours' leave and motored back to Exeter on the afternoon of August 25. The moment he reached the flight hut the telephone rang: 'One hundred and fifty plus approaching St. Albans' Head.

With no time to change he pulled the parachute harness and Mae West over his best uniform and raced to his aircraft. Once again he was to claim another two victories:

> This time the Squadron was together, a brave sight climbing away into the usual grilling sun. B Flight with eight aircraft led by Johnny Dewar, now Station Commander. A Flight above and behind, led by the Widge (Ian Gleed) and including the new C.O.
>
> We reached 15,000 feet near Portland and there, to starboard, ack-ack bursts revealed twelve fighters circling in line astern. We turned towards them but they appeared to be Spitfires.
>
> Meantime the r/t was bellowing for all aircraft to proceed to Warmwell, so we headed that way and straight ahead appeared eight little dots. They developed into twin-engined bombers, with five more appearing behind them; then six more and another five, until finally as our straining eyes grew accustomed to the light, we were heading for not one formation but upwards of a hundred Ju.88s and Dorniers.
>
> In the next few seconds as the C.O. gradually heeled over towards the leading formation of Junkers 88s we scanned the sky above for the fighters which were obviously

there. The Hun had seen us by now, and a shower of red Very lights shot out from them. They were too late; for, when we compared notes afterwards we had all fixed at least one bomber in the first attack. My particular pigeon was a Dornier which rolled over after one burst.

For a moment I thought of using the speed of my dive to execute a split turn back into the fray again, but lines of tracer bullets made me glance over my shoulder. There directly behind came our so-called Spitfires. They were Heinkel 113s, the first I had seen; and I had seen quite enough of them. That Hurricane of mine must have exceeded its design speed. I blacked-out during the pull-out.

At five thousand feet over Dorchester, I took stock of the situation. I had evaded the 113s, and high above a confused battle was still in progress. Even as I watched a ball of orange fire flashed by: it was a Hurricane. It was followed by the wheel and a strut of a bomber's under-carriage.

I was climbing up again, when almost dead ahead an aircraft dived out of a cloud. Sheer delight! It was a Messer-schmitt 109 all by itself, and obviously making for home in a hurry. The next moment I was on his tail and we slammed round into a merry dog-fight. In no time at all the Hurricane had the better of it. I fired a burst across the circle and lines of tracer cut into his fuselage.

He did not like that, and half-rolling, dived on his back. I followed and managed another burst as he rolled out of the dive. That finished him. He slowed considerably and tried one more turn in which I closed right up. He saw me positioned for the *coup-de-grâce,* but before I could administer it, he rolled beautifully, and followed with a stalled turn which took my sights off him. Next moment he was side-slipping down towards a large field, with a thin trail of smoke behind. Slipping over the hedge he put down neatly on his belly and slewed round in a scurry of dust.

I went down to prevent the pilot from firing his aircraft. He was already standing on the wing doing something in the cockpit, but I could not bring myself to fire at this man who had just put up such a beautiful exhibition of flying. The next time round I saw him standing back as a tongue of flame appeared from the cockpit. The flames took hold, and the German lifted his hand in salute as I flew low by him and waved, and he walked slowly across the field to captivity.

CHAPTER IV

NIGHT INTERLUDE

THE lightning strike of the blitzkreig policy which had brought swift victory on the Continent was rebounding viciously against the assailant. Sooner or later Hitler must cry halt to the rate of losses that he was suffering from his large-scale daylight raids; and then, it was easy to foresee, the brunt of the bombing would turn to the cover of darkness.

With this prospect in view, night operational training and sorties over Bristol became a regular routine for 87 Squadron, which that winter was to move to Charmy Down, near Bath, on full-time night operations. The plan was that Hurricanes patrolling on the edge of the searchlight zone round the city under attack, would be warned by radio telephone when the enemy aircraft were approaching. They then positioned themselves in readiness for immediate action as soon as the enemy aircraft entered the searchlight belt and were illuminated.

The theory was simple, but putting it into practice was a different matter. In effect an enemy aircraft had to be shot down in one swift burst, or it was invariably lost in darkness beyond the searchlight belt before its destruction could be completed. Occasionally there was an undeniable success when the victim was seen to go down in flames or explode on the ground, but generally the lack of opportunity for giving chase or returning to the attack made night interceptions particularly frustrating and unsatisfying.

In his diary Beamont gives this description of his nearest night success at that period: an encounter during one of the raids on Bristol.

> There was no horizon owing to the atmosphere, and in

my very inexperienced state where night flying was concerned, I was continually 'crossing my controls' and finding myself at all sorts of angles. This necessitated constant reference to instruments and therefore relaxed vigilance.

Soon, however, Operations warned me of five enemy aircraft approaching my patrol line and almost immediately an intersection of twelve searchlights appeared in the south. I moved to a position roughly five hundred yards behind, and a few hundred feet below the apex of the intersection, and followed almost in to the lights. The guns of Bristol opened fire, and though the shell bursts around were somewhat disturbing, I was too busy concentrating on seeing the Hun who was obviously somewhere ahead.

We eventually passed out of the light zone. The beams swung back after fresh targets and I was forced to return to my patrol line. This was not difficult as there were now at least six intersections, some containing up to twenty lights.

I was climbing up towards the apex of the nearest one to have another try when I spotted a bomber intersected in a web of lights right over the heart of the city.

Turning on all the taps I dived flat out at an indicated air speed of 290 m.p.h. in an attempt to close the range. The distance began to close, but too slowly. The Ju.88, as I now recognised it, was diving also and was already south of Bristol. My altimeter was reading 6,000 feet and I knew the balloons must be uncomfortably close.

With the range at last four hundred yards the Hun opened fire. He was shooting well, his tracers sailing by quite near to me. I was frightened that I should be unable to close any more, and fired a short burst to see the effect.

One of the anti-aircraft shells which had been much in evidence chose that instant to go off under my tail and threw me off aim. The blast sent me skidding around the sky before I managed to get the sights back on to the enemy and let fly burst after burst.

It is difficult to put into words the picture I shall always have in mind of that moment. The dark outline of the hood frame: the glimmer of the instruments and the glowing red bead of the gunsight on the windscreen: and outside nothing

> but a confused jumble of brilliant beams of searchlights. In the centre, the aeroplane, light grey in the glare with little white flashes appearing all over it, and apparently connected to my aircraft by red and white curving lines. The spurts of flame from the gun muzzles in the wings and the momentary impression that there was neither earth nor sky. Everything except that 88 and myself seemed to have been obliterated by the glare of the searchlights in which we were both suspended.
>
> Diving still more steeply I managed to get in a burst from some two hundred yards range but ammunition ran out in the middle of it. I was sure however that one of his engines had been hit. He promptly half-rolled slowly on to his back. Not wishing to go downstairs inverted at night at that altitude, I watched him fall away vertically out of the last of the searchlights. I avoided these beams myself and looked over the side hoping to see an explosion, but nothing happened.
>
> When I came to check my position I found I was approaching Avonmouth from the sea at 3,000 feet. Our chase had taken us right through the balloon barrage.

Encounters such as this were few and far between, and after the exhilarating activity of the Battle of Britain, pilots began to look upon night patrols as a 'bind'. Had they been able to do something to prevent those red sores of fire and destruction scabbing the cities, it would have been a different matter; but the difficulty of sighting and making attacks, the fruitlessness of the sorties, gave night operations in Hurricanes a sense of wasted endeavour.

Suddenly the flight seemed no longer the same; and as if to give impact to the feeling that it was crumbling up, came the news that Wing Commander Johnny Dewar had gone. On a visit to Tangmere he had joined as a guest in a battle over Southampton and was reported missing.

A few days later John Cock's motor cut without warning when he was leading Beamont, Trevor Jay, and Tom Mitchell in close formation. Pulling quickly away to each side, Beamont and Mitchell saw his wings pass back beneath them but Jay, in the box of the formation, had no time to evade. The tail smashed into his propeller and Cock dropped into a dive.

With the propeller stumps spinning slowly Jay held his Hurricane in a glide. Mitchell and Beamont closed in to escort him down. At 1,800 feet he knocked back the escape panel, waved, and pushed himself out of the cockpit. Crouching in a ball, tumbling over and over, he slipped back past his aircraft and still turning fell in an arc.

Beamont watched him drop, waiting for the white puff of the opening parachute. Unconsciously he was counting the seconds. 'Count ten before you pull the ripcord so that you don't get entangled with your aircraft,' was the maxim. But Jay's aircraft was nowhere near him, and still he was dropping, unarrested.

In alarm Beamont realized that he had counted twenty, and that Jay was very low with no sign of his parachute opening. He knew now that the parachute was not going to open, but much as he wished to, he could not take his eyes off the falling figure. At the last moment a sheet of flame from the Hurricane hitting the hillside mercifully diverted his attention. When he looked again, the air was still except for the leaping flames of the aircraft that had become a funeral pyre.

There was no sign of the other Hurricane, but back at base they learned that Cock had managed to recover control and had landed at Exeter with practically no tail surfaces.

Glyde, Voase-Jeff, Dewar, Jay—and then Mitchell and Cock off flying and posted to Training Command. How in the space of a month could the flight lose six stalwarts like those, and expect to retain its character? Even the ground crews were saying it was no longer what it used to be.

In Derek Ward, however, the flight had an energetic new commander who had no intention of living on past glory or giving way to depression. An enthusiastic aerobatic pilot, he decided that if the enemy were temporarily affording no opportunity of winning laurels, the flight could regain its pride with an aerobatic team.

He already had one enthusiast in an experienced flight-sergeant pilot, Badger, and he asked Beamont if he would like to join them.

Beamont was not enthusiastic. 'I can fly a Hurricane all right,' he said, 'but I am not very good at aerobatics.'

'You don't have to be,' Ward explained. 'All you have to do is follow the plane in front of you. Come up with me and see how it goes. Don't think about what I am doing. Just concentrate upon keeping station on me."

They took off and climbed, and dived, and rolled, and spiralled. It was true, Beamont discovered: there was little consciousness of aerobatics. His gaze never leaving the tail of Ward's Hurricane, he lost all idea of the horizon. Whether he was upside down or standing on his wing tip, made no difference: his one concern was keeping formation.

Occasionally he would swing out a span or two and have to come back, but he was doing sufficiently well for Ward to decide to try a loop. Beamont saw the tail in front of him rise up. Stick forward, following suit, he raced down with it in a dive; and pulled out climbing, climbing, stick right back, with no consciousness that the earth instead of the sky was above his head, no thought except holding the constant gap of ten feet between his wing tip and Ward's tailplane.

He felt the impact before he saw it. A sudden jolt that confused his senses with a spasm of fright. His mind registered the piece broken off his wing where it had hit Ward's tailplane, and the other Hurricane dropping away from his. And then he was in a dive, accelerating towards earth.

He pulled back the control column. To his relief the elevator responded and he regained level flight to find his aircraft unharmed except for the damaged wing tip.

Breathlessly he searched the sky for Ward. From the way the other Hurricane had dropped after the collision he had little hope of its survival; but as he turned miserably for base Ward's voice came on the radio telephone: 'Hello Bee. You O.K? Am returning to base.'

The strictures that Beamont expected did not materialize. Ward accepted the collision calmly. 'What happened was, you were being too "ham",' he told him. 'You need to relax more on the controls. Anyway, it won't happen again. We'll have another try this afternoon.'

Slowly with practice Beamont perfected his flying, and in formation aerobatics found not so much thrill or excitement as satisfaction: the satisfaction achieved by one's own unwavering concentration. Regularly the three pilots devoted the last half-hour of daylight to practice and exhibitions of formation take-offs, grass-cutting circuits inside the aerodrome, and rolls off loops.

Capturing the interest of both pilots and ground crews, their displays did much to revive a feeling of pride in the flight during that awkward period following the Battle of Britain. More than ten years later a former member of the ground crew writing his congratulations on Beamont's double-crossing of the Atlantic was to recall: 'A fortnight ago I met an old squadron pal, and one of the first memories of B Flight was those first-class displays which you, Mr. Ward and Chiefie Badger used to put on. It was always "down tools" when you three took off together. The whole squadron just sat back and watched.'

The winter of 1900–01 was little improvement on that of the previous year in France. If there were less mud and freezing rain, there was more snow. After one night's heavy fall a hundred and fifty men were taken on from the employment exchange to clear the runways. Although they were to be paid at the rate of time and a half, they had departed within fifteen minutes complaining that it was too cold to work. And so the pilots who had been on night patrols, ground crews who had been servicing aircraft all night by the light of hand torches in driving snow and biting winds, flight-commanders, contractors, any man who could wield a shovel, worked for eight hours clearing runways, fifty yards wide and a thousand yards long in order to have the squadron at operational readiness that night.

For the next few days it was the same. Men who would be flying or servicing the aircraft on patrols that night, spent their daytime sleeping hours clearing the runways, whilst unemployed labourers preferred the pittance of their insurance benefit and the shelter of their homes to a job of national importance that entailed the discomfort of winter cold.

Sometimes, however, one doubted if the unstinted effort and energy were worth while, particularly when the radar-equipped Beaufighters with their controlled interceptions entered their stride, and began to achieve regular successes against the night raiders. It was hard to disguise even from oneself the fact that on night patrol the Hurricanes were little more than an ineffective makeshift.

'As we cannot find the bombers to shoot them down in the air,' Beamont said disgustedly to Ward one day, 'why don't we go after them on the ground before they get here? On moonlight nights we could see well enough to attack them on their aerodromes in France.'

Enthusiastically Ward put forward the suggestion, and Group gave permission for S/L. Gleed to plan the first single-engine fighter intruder raid.

Using Warmwell as an advanced base, Ward and Beamont took off at 1.30 a.m. in a hazy moonlight that made a flarepath unnecessary. Throttling back into a very weak mixture they settled down to a fifty minute flight at the most economical cruising speed. Their flight endurance was two-and-a-half hours, and even if everything went exactly according to plan, the raid would take at least two hours.

Descending below cloud to two hundred feet they crossed the Normandy coast with gunsights on and guns ready to fire. Beamont swung away from Ward to pick up the canal that would take them to the aerodrome. But there was no worry of searching. The target found them. Four searchlights stabbed the sky and Ward was at once lit up by two of the beams. In accordance with their pre-arranged plan Beamont promptly dived at the most tenacious light and opened fire from behind it at five hundred feet. In the flicker of his tracers and the downward glow from the searchlight he caught a glimpse of shadows sprawling on to the ground in the open: and then the light was out and he was flashing over the emplacement.

He had put out one searchlight, but now from fourteen anti-aircraft posts streamers of red, green and orange shells filled the air like a gigantic display of Roman Candles. The loud explosions under the nose made him duck involuntarily, but it was Ward who was receiving the full force of the attack. Turning to starboard, Beamont opened the throttle wide and skimming over the vague shadows of trees ripped a burst of tracers into the nearest gun-post. That gun stopped firing, but all the others swung round to meet him. He had drawn the fire from Ward with a vengeance.

But he was down low, and that was his safeguard. He was flying underneath the intricate flaming patterns woven by the endless streams of flak: flying so low that not only did he present a difficult target, but most of the anti-aircraft guns could not depress sufficiently to aim at him.

Suddenly, without realizing that he was near the target, he found the aerodrome opening out ahead of him. Down lower still he went, speeding for the silhouetted shapes of the hangars at a height that would have earned him a court martial in England. Grass and runways blurred beneath him as if he were in the act of taking off, and then a black shadow materialized into the dim shape of a bomber on the tarmac. He poured a long burst into it, and without checking, raked the hangar and a line of barrack huts. But he had to rise quickly to clear the woods beyond, and the Germans were waiting for him. Two searchlights held him in a dazzling glare that blinded him from ground and instruments. For seconds that seemed minutes he raced through the spreading fan of light, more anxious about hitting the ground he could not see, than being hit by the tracer shells that he could.

And then, abruptly, he was out of light into blackness and blinking his eyes as the cockpit became alive again with the luminous glow of the instruments. He looked around him. The firework display had petered out. Either they had got Ward or he had been through and was away.

Beamont turned for the coast, and spotted a railway track. Glinting in the moonlight, the lines ran together in the distance, drawing his glance to a red glow that could only be the furnace of an engine. He veered over to investigate. It was a goods train of box cars, and a spatter of machine-gun tracer put beyond doubt the military importance of its cargo. Sweeping round he dropped to the level of the fields and attacked along the embankment, raking the train at close range from the guard's van to engine until his guns ran out of ammunition.

He wiped the sweat from his face and turned again for the coast. Altogether it had been a good night. There was a satisfying feeling of doing something, the exhilaration of being on the offensive, instead of the monotonous frustration of ineffective night patrols over Britain. He climbed to 7,000 feet for the Channel crossing and called Ward on the r/t but made no contact. He was wondering whether the other Hurricane had succeeded in escaping its sharp reception, when he heard Ward calling base for a bearing. Yes, it had been a doubly satisfying night.

Group thought so, too. Next night four aircraft were detailed to raid in pairs another aerodrome housing two squadrons of Messerschmitts. The C.O. and Sgt. Thoroughgood took off first, but were back in twenty minutes. Almost colliding with a Dornier 17 over the Channel, they had shot it down in flames. A good beginning to a night in which Beamont and Peter Roscoe, taking off later, were to find a concentration of Me.109s parked together and destroy or badly damage six of them.

The squadron tail was wagging as gaily as ever. Any inferiority complex about turning night owls was gone. There was excitement and stimulus in those mad, low-level runs, raking the aerodrome with guns chattering and the acrid tang of cordite in the nostrils. Darting between the coloured curtains of tracer, and below the flashes of exploding shells from the heavy anti-aircraft batteries: racing through an inferno of dazzle and noise, and hoping above all to avoid those probing fingers of searchlight beams which more than any flak had the quality of sapping confidence with their embarrassing exposure.

Aerodrome strafing in the full moon period became the highlight of the month: but in their successes the pilots were making a rod for their backs. With the spring returned memories of daytime dog-fights, of diving out of the sun to break up enemy formations and send at least one or two of their number spinning down in flames before they realized what had 'bounced' them. Better weather brought no call for daylight patrols from 87 Squadron, however. By their own efforts the pilots had established themselves as a night-fighter unit, and now they looked like remaining one.

No one took kindly to the idea of missing the season for air-to-air combat, and Ward and the C.O., Ian Gleed, earnestly discussed the situation. To break into preserves covered by other squadrons would be difficult, but there was one sea area to the west in which the enemy was known to operate, and which was not patrolled because of the absence of a suitable airfield.

Ward set off on a tour of the Scilly Isles. Strictly speaking, there was no suitable site for a military aerodrome from which to launch patrols against the enemy shipping down to Brest. But he did find one possible cliff-top field on St. Mary's. Except for a rise in the middle it was reasonably level, a plateau at the top of a steep hillside rising from the village and harbour below, with the cliff edge dropping sheer to a rocky sea, and plantations of fir trees forming the inland boundaries. The only possible landing run was to and from the cliff edge, a distance of four hundred and fifty yards. Notwithstanding the hump in the middle, decided Ward, experienced Hurricane pilots should be able to land and take off from there.

The C.O. agreed and put forward the idea to Group, who gave permission for the detachment of an isolated unit of six aircraft to St. Mary's on anti-shipping raider patrols as a trial venture.

Beamont watched with interest as the C.O. went in to make the first landing on the field. Approaching low over the cliff edge, he bounced on the hump and ran down the slope until the ground crew literally grabbed hold of the wings to stop him from over-running into the firs.

'Shades of Dunning landing the Sopwith Pup on the *Furious*!' Beamont exclaimed to himself as he circled to follow the C.O. down. 'This must be the nearest link between the R.A.F. and the Fleet Air Arm.'

In the light of the C.O.'s experience he throttled back sooner, whilst he was still over the rocks, and touched down almost as soon as the cliff had reached him. Nevertheless he too bounced on the hump. He slammed his brakes full on, but continued to roll down the slope and pulled up fifteen yards from the C.O.

Making the landing was not as bad as it appeared, he decided, and certainly not as bad as it looked from ground level, with the aircraft sinking out of sight at the cliff end of the field, and taking an interminable time before it appeared again over the top of the rise, and rolled down the slope at sixty-five miles an hour.

Arrangements had been made for the keepers on Bishop Rock Lighthouse, five miles away, to morse messages of approaching aircraft. The unit had barely landed before an aldis lamp blinked the message: 'Aircraft south.'

With ground crews still servicing the aircraft after landing Badger took off in the only Hurricane ready for flight. Five minutes later he was back doing a victory roll with the wind whistling through the open gun ports. He had encountered two Do.22 seaplanes and had shot down one. The other escaped.

A few days later the C.O. repeated the success and put a Do.18 flying boat into the sea. Certainly the scheme had justified itself; but for Beamont new spheres were waiting. At the end of a fortnight his D.F.C. came through, and he was posted as a flight commander to 79 Squadron at Fairwood Common, near Swansea.

CHAPTER V

COURT MARTIAL

Beamont had left a good squadron of which he had been proudly a part for twenty months. A stranger in the midst of strangers, it was natural that he should be hypercritical in comparing the new with the familiar custom and achievement of the past, particularly as 79 Squadron was at that time suffering from the aftermath of the Battle of Britain. There had been no new interests to help weather the reaction following those weeks of intensive activity and heavy loss, and in the change-over from fighting for existence to a flying training routine, former keenness and enthusiasm had to some extent dwindled into apathy.

To Beamont the symptoms seemed much the same as those which had appeared in his old squadron and had been overcome largely by Derek Ward's efforts. He set about applying similar treatment. In the absence of direct conflict with the enemy on which to sharpen pride he turned to fostering inter-flight rivalry.

His pilots listened without much interest. They were fired with no particular desire to prove themselves the crack flight in the squadron, and certainly not at the cost of disturbance in a comfortably established, if uninspiring, routine of uneventful convoy patrols by day and inactive leisure by night. But Beamont was the flight commander, and within a week B Flight was starting night flying.

An uphill struggle was made no easier by sarcastic comments from A Flight, but popularity, or lack of it, did not worry a man who from upbringing as an only child was slow to make friends, and content in his own company. Time he was sure, was on his side: and he was right.

With the initial plunge taken, night flying and formation aerobatics ceased to be regarded as a 'bind' and became accepted as a normal part of the flight's activities. Improvement and progress in flying skill in turn bred an enthusiasm and pride which spread to ground crews, who at first had been equally resentful of the extra work which the whims of the new flight commander were causing. A Flight's taunts about 'this Cock Horse at Felsgarth nonsense' took on a boomerang quality with the feeling that they were being left behind.

Exactly how wholeheartedly his flight had swung behind him, Beamont would probably never have guessed but for the trouble which was to result in his court martial. One entry in his pilot's log book tells the story.

Date	*Aircraft*	*Pilot*	*Passenger*	*Duty*
Sept 19th	Hurricane 3160	Self	A.S.O. Adams	To Pembrey and return

It was one of those spontaneous, unthinking gestures. Shirley Adams, a W.A.A.F. Cipher Officer, wanted to go to a mess party at her former station, Pembrey. The distance was not far, but bad bus and train service made the journey a difficult and tedious one.

'Don't bother about that. I'll fly you there and pick you up next morning,' offered Beamont blithely.

He promptly forgot his promise until Shirley telephoned him on the afternoon of the dance to ask what time they were leaving.

'Oh Lor'!' exclaimed Beamont to himself. Into the telephone he said: 'Ring you back in five minutes. I'll just make sure the Tiger Moth is ready.'

The Tiger Moth was not ready. It was away on some errand and was not due back until next day.

Beamont apologized as well as he could. There was not another passenger-carrying aircraft in the flight.

'But that means I can't go, then,' protested Shirley. 'It's too late to get there any other way, now.'

Her remonstrance went home. It was his fault. He ought not to have suggested the flight in the first place, but having done so, he should certainly not have forgotten to make arrangements for the Tiger Moth to be available.

He pondered uncertainly. During the Battle of Britain he and Derek Ward had often carried each other in a Hurricane when going to collect new or repaired aircraft for the squadron. The second parachute had been packed in the radio cavity, and the passenger had sat in the pilot's seat with the pilot perched on top of him to fly the aircraft. The flight had been uncomfortable and very draughty because the hood had to be left open, but the idea had worked.

'The only thing I can do,' suggested Beamont, 'is take you in a Hurricane. It means I will have to sit in your lap but it won't be for much longer than fifteen minutes.'

They were carefree, those flying days of 1941, in which, outside Training Command, regulations were more often observed in obeyance than in fulfilment. But Pembrey was a Training Command station.

The sound of the Hurricane caught the attention of Pembrey's Squadron Leader, Administration. He glanced out of the window of his office, watched the Hurricane come in to land and turned back to his papers. A minute later the noise of the Hurricane's engine opening up for take-off drew him again to the window. Privately envisaging condign punishment for these operational pilots who could not be bothered with the normal formalities of reporting and signing in at stations at which they landed, he watched the Hurricane go. And then his eyes bulged. Walking from the runway was a W.A.A.F. officer.

He pressed his buzzer imperatively. 'Have that W.A.A.F. officer brought straight to my office,' he commanded.

Shirley Adams thought quickly as she was escorted to the headquarters building. Her one concern was for Beamont. If she admitted she had been in the Hurricane it was going to be a simple matter for them to trace the pilot, and Beamont would be in trouble.

Resolved to admit nothing that might incriminate him, she met the interrogation of the Squadron Leader, Admin. with a blank refusal to answer questions or offer explanations.

'I came here in my own time to attend the mess dance to which I have been invited,' she insisted. 'And I have no intention of discussing my movements when I am off duty with you or anyone else.'

'You refuse to make a statement?' the Squadron Leader repeated.

'Absolutely.'

'Very well. A full investigation will be made, and you will find your attitude will not help matters for you.'

That evening Shirley Adams telephoned Beamont and explained the position. 'I have refused to say anything, Bee,' she reported. 'And the point is he saw the Hurricane land and take-off but he did not see me get out of it. I don't think anyone could have done because we got out on the far side, you remember, away from Flying Control.'

'Good girl,' said Beamont. 'Keep it up. If you don't admit you were in the aircraft, they'll have nothing to go on, and it will all blow over. Have a good time at the dance and don't worry.'

'All right, Bee. But don't come over for me in the morning. I'll get back under my own steam.'

The Squadron Leader, Admin. wasted no time in taking steps to see that these young pilots refrained from behaving as if King's Regulations did not exist. Quite obviously if, as he was absolutely certain, Assistant Section Officer Adams had been flown to Pembrey from Fairwood she would have travelled in a 79 Squadron aircraft; and of the pilots who were likely to indulge in such an escapade, suspicion automatically pointed at Beamont.

Next morning he was summoned to the Station Commander's office.

'Sorry, Beamont,' the Station Commander greeted him, 'but I have to place you under open arrest on the charge of unlawfully carrying a passenger in a Hurricane. You don't have to say anything about it now, of course.'

'Right, sir. There is just one point, though. Who is to take over my flight?'

'What do you mean?'

'If I am under open arrest, sir, I cannot run my flight, can I?'

The Station Commander considered. 'No, of course you can't. Look after things for the time being and I'll find out from Group and let you know.'

Later that morning the Station Commander telephoned him.

'Beamont. It is in order for you to carry on with your flight duties as usual. Unfortunately I am afraid that this does not mean that the investigation has been closed. The enquiry is to continue.'

Beamont put down the telephone. That must be the shortest arrest on record, he thought. It was hard to take the situation seriously. He had given a girl a lift to a dance and some zealous Training Command officer was trying to make out that he was a criminal.

With a knock on the door his flight sergeant entered the office.

'Yes, Chiefie?' Beamont enquired, looking at him curiously. His flight sergeant was an experienced man, not usually so hesitant and embarrassed.

'It's these rumours, I wanted to speak to you about, sir. I don't know if you have heard, but there is talk that a Hurricane from our flight took off yesterday afternoon with a passenger.'

Beamont waited.

'I thought you would like to know, sir,' the flight sergeant continued, 'that I carried out a full investigation. Nobody in B Flight knows anything about such a trip, sir, and we have no record of the flight. I have also checked on the state of all our aircraft during yesterday afternoon, and they were all accounted for. All except one were engaged on convoy patrol, and that one, Number 3160, is down as unserviceable. So I don't see how it could have been one of our aircraft, sir.'

Beamont looked him in the eye. 'Thank you, chiefy,' he said. 'Thank you for letting me know the position.'

Though they moved slowly, there was no stopping the wheels of military law once they had been set in motion. An officer from the legal advocate's department duly arrived to take a summary of evidence. Three frustrating days he spent inspecting flight records and documents and interrogating members of the flight. It was no use. No one would admit knowledge of the matter.

Refusing to accept that there was no evidence, the legal advocate's department took the unusual steps of appointing another investigating officer to compile a second summary of evidence. Although the emissary was prepared to pull no punches, he discovered that he could talk until his tongue was swollen, but not one man could he find who would provide the evidence necessary to prefer the charge.

Weeks sped by carrying September into December and with the matter still unsettled. Beamont, at the end of his two years of operational duty was posted to the Special Duties list for production test flying with Hawker Aircraft Limited. But what once might have been dismissed as a storm in a teacup had developed into a point of principle between Commands, for Training Command Headquarters had passed a report on the affair to H.Q. Fighter Command. It was common knowledge that Beamont had actually carried A.S.O. Adams as a passenger in a Hurricane. Obviously a junior officer could not be permitted to get away with setting at naught the whole machinery of Air Force law and discipline.

With insufficient outside evidence forthcoming, the case against Beamont resolved into a question of obtaining a direct admission from either himself or his passenger, and the authorities decided to renew the attack through Assistant Section Officer Adams. She was in the most Junior of W.A.A.F. commissioned ranks: surely, they decided, it would not be too difficult for a sufficiently high-ranking officer to extract by intimidation, if necessary, the information from a young girl.

Worried by the summons to attend an enquiry at 11 Group, Shirley Adams telephoned Beamont.

'What a dirty trick! Picking on a woman!' he exclaimed. 'Why don't they have a go at me?'

'It's not myself I'm concerned about,' Shirley said. 'I am frightened I might land you in the cart.'

'Now you mustn't worry about that,' Beamont advised. 'So long as you keep refusing to say anything about the flight, they can't do a thing. But don't worry. If the pressure gets too great tell them you did fly in the Hurricane with me. It won't matter a bit.'

She telephoned him again afterwards. 'Bee, I'm sorry. I had to tell them.' She was near to tears. 'I kept it up as long as I could, but they started threatening seriously. They said they knew you had taken me in the Hurricane, and this was the last chance they were giving me to admit the fact. They said if I did not tell them there and then, they would get us anyway in the end, and it would be very much worse for both you and me. I'm sorry, Bee.'

'That's all right, Shirley,' he tried to comfort her. 'It doesn't matter that much. It's probably all for the best.'

He replaced the receiver. 'The swine!' he swore. At first the whole business had been a bit of a joke. He had the natural contempt of a young fighter pilot for what he regarded as fossilized Training Command and administrative types. He had initiated no steps himself to try and cover the fact that he had flown a W.A.A.F. in a Hurricane; but as he had watched the authorities floundering about and getting nowhere, his obstinate streak—what his friends called his 'bloody-mindedness'—had resolved that he was not going to help them by voluntarily incriminating himself. But now the incident had lost its amusement. The ordeal to which they had subjected Shirley Adams made him furious. For the first time he really hated their guts.

In February the order to be present at Fairwood Common, the 79 Squadron base, for his court martial reached him at Hawker's. A hand-written postscript added a final curt instruction: 'You will travel by public transport at your own expense, and will not make use of Service aircraft for the journey.'

'The hell I won't!' thought Beamont. He went to Philip Lucas, then Hawker's chief test pilot.

'I have to go to Fairwood for my court martial on Wednesday,' he said. 'Is it all right if I borrow a Hurricane?'

Lucas nodded. 'Sure. By the way Sholto Douglas was talking about the case when I lunched with him the other day. He thinks it's your own fault. He said if you had had the sense to land at a fighter station, none of this nonsense would have arisen!'

Beamont landed at Fairwood where the mess officer, who had been appointed to escort him, set about preparing the defence by opening the bar.

'Must keep up our spirits, old boy, advised his counsel.

By the time the case for the defence had been prepared and the hour for the court martial was at hand, Beamont was feeling hazy.

Trying hard to look dignified and not to sway, he faced the court which was sitting at a trestle table covered with a Union Jack. Wrapped up in the phraseology of sections from the Air Force Act, the charge of taking Assistant Section Officer Adams as a passenger in a Hurricane on September 19, 1941, was read to him.

'Yes,' answered Beamont. 'I did.'

Immediately the defending officer leapt to his feet to make a dramatic, irrelevant pronouncement about Beamont's record as a fighter pilot.

Silence followed. The officer from the legal advocate's department put down the file of documents and papers with which he had been busying himself. There was nothing more to be said.

'Findings will be promulgated,' announced the president.

Congratulating themselves on the record speed in which the verdict had been achieved, counsel and client hurried back to the bar to recover from the ordeal in time for lunch.

In due course Beamont was ordered to report to Fairwood to hear the findings of the court.

'You will have to wait in the corridor,' said the station adjutant testily. 'I'm afraid it will be a long wait because the Station Commander is very busy.'

At that moment the door of the Station Commander's office opened and Group Captain Richard Atcherly, one of the redoubtable Atcherly twins, put his head into the corridor. He looked twice at Beamont and with a massive sweep of his arm beckoned him into his office.

'Hallo Beamont. How do you like this testing job at Hawker's?'

'Very much, sir.'

'Sit down.' Atcherly waved him into a chair. 'Tell me, what are these new Typhoons like?'

They discussed Typhoons and test flying in general, until conversation lagged and Atcherly asked: 'Now what was it you wanted to see me about?'

'Court martial, sir.'

'Oh, yes, I remember. Wait a minute.' There was a whirl of papers on the desk and a frantic search ended triumphantly. 'Here it is.' He looked at Beamont. 'Better stand up for this hadn't you?'

'Yes, sir.' Beamont rose to his feet and stood at attention.

'Good. Now let's see. I'm to give you a severe rep—you're severely reprimanded. That's that. I'm afraid you lose three months seniority.'

Atcherly looked at him again. 'What are you doing with your cap on?' he barked. 'Don't you know you shouldn't have your cap on when you're hearing the findings of a court martial? Give it to me.'

Feeling that anything might happen, Beamont handed over his cap. Atcherly searched furiously again on the desk and found a piece of yellow chalk. On the peak of Beamont's cap he proceeded to chalk the 'scrambled eggs' of a group captain's gold braid.

'There,' he pronounced spinning the cap at Beamont. 'Now you are properly demoted!'

'Oh, one more thing. The court add a recommendation that more attention should be paid to the keeping of flight records. But as you are no longer with the flight that hardly concerns you. It will be passed to the proper quarter.

'Give my regards to Philip Lucas when you get back to Hawker's. Tell him we need those Typhoons in a hurry.'

CHAPTER VI

PRODUCTION TESTING

NORMALLY a tour in Fighter Command consisted of two hundred operational flying hours or twenty months duty with a squadron. Beamont's first operational tour had run from December, 1909, to December, 1911, but try as he might, he could delay his posting no longer.

Sympathetic with his abhorrence at the idea of going to an Operational Training Unit as an instructor, David Haysom, the squadron commander, suggested two alternatives. 'Leigh Mallory wants a personal aide,' he said. 'I think you would stand a good chance for that post.'

'No, thanks,' said Beamont bluntly.

'Don't be too hasty,' advised Haysom. 'It would be a good springboard for your career. You meet the right people in a job like that.'

'I am more interested in flying aircraft than meeting people, sir,' Beamont retorted.

'All right. How about the Special Duties list. There's a scheme for pilots to do rest tours with aircraft firms as production test pilots. Hawker's a need a pilot straight away.'

'That should be fun,' said Beamont thoughtfully, recalling the details of Hawker's new Typhoon, with the 2,000-horsepower engine which he had seen amongst the aircraft identification particulars in the Intelligence section. It would be good to get the chance of flying with 2,000 horse-power at one's fingertips. 'Not,' he had the grace to add, 'that I know anything about test flying.'

'Don't worry,' commented Haysom drily. 'They'll soon teach you.'

Beamont was just turned twenty-one when he arrived at the

Hawker factory at Langley. Up to that time his career in the air had been devoted entirely to learning to be a fighter pilot. He had nearly eight hundred hours in Hurricanes. He had flown them into battle and he had achieved a standard of formation and aerobatic skill that gave him a well-founded confidence in his ability to do anything that could be done with a Hurricane. That was the one aircraft about which he was sure he knew all there was to be known.

At Hawker's he discovered quickly that his knowledge of the Hurricane added up to next to nothing. The R.A.F. had trained him to fly, and to fight in the air, but the one thing they had not taught him was the 'Why' of flying. He knew nothing about identification and correction of flying faults. He was almost completely ignorant of the problems of stability, trim, and the balance of controls. Within a week he had, by his own admission, changed from a self-satisfied fighter pilot to a very deflated novice.

Hawker's civilian team of Philip Lucas, Bill Humble, and Hubert Broad put themselves out to help him, with Lucas, the chief test pilot, acting as his particular mentor on the attitude and outlook necessary for test flying.

If at first Beamont smiled to himself at the horror with which they had learned of some of the things that were being done to their aircraft in dog-fights, he was quick to realize the sanity of their view. Test flying had no room for the hot-blooded violence of combat tactics. It called for a totally different type of approach, a cold, reasoned observation and assessment.

A test pilot would not consider attempting manœuvres that were beyond the designed limits of his machine; and test flying demanded much more accurate piloting of the aircraft than that normally required from a fighter pilot.

Philip Lucas put the position to him bluntly. 'The Service is more interested in you, the pilot, than it is in your aircraft. We are not. We are interested first and last in the aircraft. If you run into serious trouble in the air, your duty as a fighter pilot is to bale out and get down in one piece, ready to go up again in another aircraft. A test pilot's duty is to stay in the aircraft and try to get it back in one piece, particularly if it is an experimental prototype. As a test pilot you should never think of baling out whilst there is the smallest chance of saving the aircraft and bringing back intact the evidence of whatever it is that has failed.'

These were not idle words, Beamont knew. Lucas was a good example of the test pilot's creed and had recently been awarded the George Medal for putting it into practice himself. During a flight of the first Typhoon prototype, the fuselage had failed and looking down, he had seen the earth through a large crack behind his seat. Instead of promptly baling out as most pilots would have done, Lucas had stayed in his seat and succeeded in landing the aircraft.

Each day Lucas and the other pilots taught Beamont the rudiments of the Hurricane that he thought he had known so well; and then after a week, with considerable trepidation, he was sent up to test his first production Hurricane.

The production test routine was simple enough: a full throttle climb to rated altitude, a full throttle straight and level flight, and a maximum design speed dive to 400 m.p.h. which occasionally shook off a fuselage panel. By far the greatest amount of work was needed on the correction of trim. Today aircraft are built to very fine limits and need only small adjustments of trim on tests, but at that time less accuracy in construction was tolerated. On top of this, in those days of mass production the standards were lower, and inconsistencies between one production Hurricane and the next were frequent. Often, the test pilot would land keeping the engine running, and hold up three, four or five fingers to indicate the number of inches of trimming cord necessary. Whilst he stayed in the cockpit, airframe fitters would slap more cord and dope on to the ailerons or rudder, and off he would go again without delay to check the consequent adjustment of trim before the aircraft could be signed off for delivery to a Service maintenance unit on its way to a squadron.

Although mainly occupied with flying production Hurricanes, Beamont did get occasional flights in the new Typhoon, which was being pressed into service before it was properly developed, to face the challenge of the Focke Wulfe 190. The Typhoon was an attempt to make quick amends for the Tornado, which like the Manchester, our biggest wartime failures in fighters and bombers respectively, had been victims of the Rolls Royce Vulture, an under-developed engine upon which the Ministry of Aircraft Production had taken a gamble in an attempt to rush high-powered aircraft into the battle. The Manchester died a quick death, the Vulture engine was scrapped, and the Tornado, refitted with Napier's Sabre engine, emerged as the Typhoon.

Once again pressed beyond caution by the need of the circumstances, the Ministry of Aircraft Production had picked on the latest, most powerful engine, in spite of the fact that this one too was still in process of development, and ordered it into service. By peacetime reckoning the Sabre would have faced another two years of tests before being passed to power a Service aircraft, and even by wartime standards it was at least a year ahead of schedule. But this time the M.A.P. had profited by the previous error. No second repetition of scrapping and abandoning was to be laid at the door of their policy of hustle. This time, it was emphasized, there was to be no mistake. The Sabre was not to be allowed to fail.

Instead, therefore, of engine faults being revealed and remedied during normal ground test runs, it was left to both test pilots and squadrons to take on the onus of continuing the engine development and discovering the faults in the air.

On his first cross-country flight in a Typhoon Beamont ran into trouble. He was delivering an early production machine to Gloster's when without warning oil spurted over the windscreen and covered his goggles. Unable to see he opened the port window and pushed down his goggles. A trail of black smoke was streaming back from the aircraft and he looked round quickly for a place to land. He picked up the Thames with Reading to the east and as he lost height caught a glimpse of an airfield. But hope died at once. It was under construction, dotted with bulldozers and other obstructions. Next moment the oil, still gushing up in the cockpit, sprayed into his eyes. Squinting through the smarting, greasy, haze, he did a wide sweep with rapidly failing oil pressure and side-slipped towards another small field from which Tiger Moths were operating. Barely able to see through the mist of oil he managed to touch down the Typhoon safely, and bumped across rough grass to stop near the far hedge.

Congratulating himself on not breaking anything, Beamont stepped out of the cockpit. Covered in oil the wing slipped away from his foot and he fell headlong on to the ground. Painfully he picked himself up and tried to finger some of the oil out of his eyes. Still squinting he saw he had come to rest by a Tiger Moth.

An airman arrived. 'The chief flying instructor wishes to see you immediately," he said.

Beamont blinked owlishly through the oil. 'Tell the C.F.I. that I will see him as soon as I have had my eyes attended to. Now where are the sick quarters?'

When he had had the oil swabbed out of his eyes Beamont went to the flight offices. Waiting had not improved the C.F.I.'s temper.

'What the bloody hell do you mean by cutting across the approach at an elementary training school?' he stormed.

'I'm sorry, sir, but what would you suggest in the circumstances?' Beamont countered. 'It was an emergency landing.'

'What emergency?'

Beamont sent up a prayer for patience. 'I was delivering the aircraft to Gloster's and lost the oil pressure just east of here. I couldn't see for oil towards the end.'

'What is the thing anyway?' inquired the C.F.I., interest getting the better of his liver.

'Typhoon,' said Beamont. 'Can you put a guard on it and give orders that no one must go near, whilst I get things organized?'

He telephoned Hawker's, and when their engineers arrived to dismantle the Typhoon, they found that a main oil pipe had burst.

Fascinating though test flying was, by the end of six months Beamont found the longing to get back to squadron life restless within him again. It was always the same. Fighter pilots and bomber crews would come through the nail-biting stage of the end of a tour of operations to discover that they had, unbelievably and without knowing why, survived. But no sooner had they settled down to a routine of living that enabled plans to be made confidently for a future in terms of weeks and months, than they were agitating to return to a squadron. It was a curious, compelling fascination that squadron life exerted, a charm as fatal and demanding as infatuation for a woman. It called for utter surrender and offered in return a hotchpotch of uncertainty, an unpredictable assortment of thrills and fears, anxieties and satisfactions. But though life was played hard and fast, and conventions crumbled, there was a deeper side to the atmosphere. Strangely divorced from physical excesses, the spirit attained an elevating sense of vocation, a feeling of admission to a select brotherhood in which the terms of membership ruled out the petty jealousies and paltriness of everyday life, and brought a truer appreciation of real values.

'There's no need for you to go back yet, you know,' Philip Lucas remarked, when Beamont mentioned his intention. 'You are doing a vital job here.'

Beamont shook his head. 'I'd like to come back to you afterwards, but just now I feel I ought to get back with the boys. On Typhoons, if possible.'

The posting was simple enough to arrange. Hawker's were in constant liaison with former Spitfire squadrons which were converting to Typhoons. After a few weeks with one of these squadrons, 56, as a supernumerary flight lieutenant, Beamont went to a 609 Squadron party at Duxford and spent the night there. In the morning he was awakened by a loud crump like the distant sound of a bomb. He looked out and saw in the early morning light the regrettably familiar column of black smoke rising from the aerodrome. Two Typhoons had collided on take-off and the pall of smoke signified the end of one of the flight commanders, Francois de Spirlet, an old friend of his from 87 Squadron days.

Beamont stayed to see the Commanding Officer, Paul Ritchie.

'Sorry about this morning, sir,' he said, 'but I hear you want a new flight commander?'

Next day he was posted to 609; and when Ritchie left ten weeks later, he was given command of the squadron.

CHAPTER VII

TYPHOON TROUBLES

For the Ministry of Aircraft Production it was a case of Hobson's choice. Neither the Spitfire nor the Hurricane was fast enough to match the new Focke Wolfe 190 with which the enemy was launching a campaign of tip-and-run raids on coastal towns. Only the Typhoon had the speed.

Although the decision to use the Typhoon before it was ready was ultimately justified by the results, it meant in the beginning that the first Typhoon squadrons were virtually continuing the flight test development of the aircraft with none of the facilities for the job but every disadvantage. The price of the Typhoon's premature introduction to operational service was heavy. During the first nine months the casualty rate from teething troubles was greater by far than that from enemy action, and in the period July to September, the loss from engine or structural failure of at least one aircraft per sortie occurred on Typhoon wing practices and sweeps over the French coast. Without the tremendous pressure resulting from these accidents, however, it is unlikely that the Typhoon would have developed and been available in adequate numbers to provide one of the finest ground support aircraft for the invasion of Europe some eighteen months later.

The main consequence of the Typhoon's over-hasty appearance was recurring engine trouble. Emergency landings became an inevitable part of the routine of flying Typhoons; and the prospect particularly of engine trouble over the sea was not a happy one.

Patrols between Dungeness and Margate involved flying one and a half hour sorties over the Channel at cruising speed to obtain maximum endurance, and at a height of under 200 feet to avoid radar detection. If engine trouble did occur, the aircraft's relatively low speed gave the pilot little chance of gaining sufficient height for baling out. All he could do was try to ditch, i.e. land the aircraft on its belly on the water, and get out into his dinghy before it sank. But that meant really no chance at all. With its big scoop radiator under the nose, the Typhoon would not ditch safely, no matter how smooth the sea. Long before the aircraft could settle to a standstill the radiator had ploughed under the surface and turned the Typhoon over on to its nose, carrying it straight down to the bottom.

In the first month of patrols, 609 Squadron lost in this pattern, which was to become all too tragically familiar, two officers and one sergeant pilot in comparatively calm sea conditions: and another pilot, forced to attempt a ditching in a gale, was swallowed without a splash amidst the flying spray.

Only one man survived an engine failure in a Typhoon over the Channel during those early months. He had fought to get the cockpit hood off as he felt the radiator touch the water, but the release mechanism was stuck—another frequent difficulty with the Typhoon—and he was carried to the bottom of the Channel. When the whirl of his senses had subsided the Typhoon was resting on the sea bed and he was unharmed in the cockpit, which was providing a reasonably adequate air chamber. Still unable to release the cockpit canopy he escaped through the side windows, and surfaced in a boil of air bubbles to be picked up by a rescue launch.

But engine trouble was only part of the additional hazard that the pioneer Typhoon squadrons had to face. Tails began to break off the aircraft in power dives. In one instance, before the pilot had time to think of baling out, his aircraft disintegrated around him and he found himself dropping to earth in nothing but the seat. He managed to release the seat harness, pull his parachute and land safely. The majority were not so fortunate, and pilots understandably began to be affected by the depressing feeling that should they be lucky enough to escape engine failure, the aircraft's tail would probably fall off anyway.

Even in combat the constant threat that the unreliability of engine or airframe would do the enemy's work for him, was a more conscious menace than the guns of Messerschmitt or Focke

Wulfe. The day of the Commando raid on Dieppe saw the Duxford Wing bouncing a formation of F.W.190s south of Le Treport. Diving out of the sun they took the F.W. 190s by surprise and damaged three of them; but the cost to the Typhoons was heavier. Two broke their tails and buried themselves in the soil of France.

Airmen are notoriously conservative creatures, and in the war few were more unshakable in devotion to their aircraft than Spitfire pilots. Inured in a basic belief that no aircraft was, or could be, better than the Spitfire, they jealously defied any machine to supersede it. When one with claims to a better performance did appear, the Spitfire pilot was not slow to make capital out of its weaknesses.

By any standards the Typhoon's record in its first months was bad: but matters were not helped by the biased view adopted towards the aircraft by some ex-Spitfire pilots in administrative posts at Group and Command. Generally throughout Fighter Command the Typhoon acquired a worse reputation than any other operational fighter had done, before or since. The mark of a jinx had been set upon the Typhoon, and that was one more battle which the first squadrons had to fight along with the faults of the under-developed engine and suspected structural weakness.

Concerned about safety and serviceability Fighter Command considered grounding the Typhoon, but Beamont fought the suggestion vigorously. Apart from a possessive pride which was loath to see his first squadron associated with failure, he was confident that the aircraft's defects would be ironed out in time and that grounding would hinder rather than help matters. In his opinion the one solution which would silence the critics and restore the morale of his squadron to the glory of its Spitfire days was to prove the Typhoon in battle with the least possible delay.

It was largely a one-man fight in which the close liason that Philip Lucas allowed him to maintain with the Langley experimental organization, enabled Beamont to reinforce his operational views with first-hand technical arguments in discussions with both 'Dingbat' Saunders, the A.O.C., and Air Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh Mallory, the Commander-in-Chief.

Twice Beamont was summoned to meetings at Fighter Command, which was considering throwing the Typhoon out of service. He admitted readily that he was anxious every time he flew a Typhoon, but argued that that was no reason for condemning the aircraft. The trouble with the tail was a fundamental fault that might have occurred in any aircraft with the speed and power of the Typhoon. It was being investigated, and meanwhile regular flying experience was helping to provide corrective measures much more rapidly than would normally have been the case.

Engine faults, which were natural at the stage of development that the Sabre had reached, would also be remedied so much the quicker because of the concentrated lessons of experience. Some lives had been lost, and there might be more casualties to follow, but the risk must have been calculated when the Ministry of Aircraft Production hurried the engine into service. It did not necessarily mean that the decision was a wrong one. He had faith in the efforts of the manufacturers, as he had faith in the basic design of the aircraft.

Operationally the Typhoon was easy to fly, a rugged, tough aircraft and a good stable firing platform for its four cannon. It was docile on the approach, and the strong undercarriage accepted heavy landings in bad visibility without damage. It could out-turn both the F.W.190 and the Me.109F, although not a Spitfire expertly flown. Easily the fastest aircraft at low altitude that we then possessed, it was at sea level about 30 m.p.h. faster than the Me.109F, and 15–20 m.p.h. faster than the F.W.190.

At least three members of the final meeting at Fighter Command seemed to Beamont to have made up their minds in advance that the Typhoon must go. In the C.-in-C. however, Beamont found a champion in sympathy with his views. Leigh Mallory won the day. The Typhoon was reprieved.

Beamont's pleas for more opportunity of action instead of the monotonous, uneventful, patrols during which thoughts turned naturally to the prospect of engine failure and the cold sea below, were realized in November, 1912. In spite of the efforts of the Spitfire squadrons the F.W.190s' almost daily tip-and-run raids between the North Foreland and the Isle of Wight were taking a mounting toll of civilian lives and property; and 609 Squadron was moved to Manston to see how it fared with the advantage of the Typhoon's superior speed.

'This is your chance, Beamont, to prove your faith in the Typhoon,' Saunders announced. 'Defeat the Hun in this phase, and I promise you can take your Typhoon on any type of offensive operation you think suitable.'

Manston, with the enemy coast in sight at a thousand feet over the aerodrome, and no more than ten minutes away by Typhoon, was an ideal base for operations against the F.W.190s which were flying too low to be detected by radar. Speed and low flying were the elements of the tip-and-run raiders' success. Deliberately avoiding battle, formations of two to eight aircraft swept in out of rainstorm, mist, dawn light and dusk at more than 300 miles an hour to drop their bombs on the first group of buildings on the coast, and wheel out to sea again at fifty feet or less. From first to last sighting, the attack could be over in less than two minutes.

Chances of interception were low indeed but a programme of standing patrols was at once put into operation. From dawn to dusk the enemy coastline was kept in continual surveillance by at least two aircraft. The very first morning four F.W.190s swept over the western side of Manston aerodrome straffing the power station with cannon but doing very little damage. On their way home they were caught off Deal by two Typhoons which each claimed one victim. Within a week another pair of patrolling Typhoons met two F.W.190s, heading for Dover, in mid-channel. The Germans turned promptly for home, but their belief in their superior speed was rudely shattered. Sixty seconds later they were at the bottom of the Channel.

The battle had been joined; and after months of lassitude the morale and spirit of the squadron began to rise. Pilots flew two, three, and sometimes four patrols a day, but never could they have enough flying. Rather than miss an opportunity of adding to the squadron score, they asked to give up days off and defer leave. What did the teething troubles matter now? In the Typhoon pilots had discovered suddenly that they had an aircraft which could out-race, out-manœuvre, and out-fire Germany's new fighter.

But there was one personal satisfaction which Beamont sought. Deciding to settle for good the Spitfire pilots refusal to be convinced of the Typhoon's claim to superior speed, he challenged Ray Harris, C.O. of 91 Squadron, which was equipped with the latest Spitfire XII, to a race. They took off together from Manston on a race round the coast to Lympne. There was no need to finish the course. By the time the Typhoon had reached Dover, the Spitfire XII was already a mile behind.

Soon in combat reports, too, Spitfire pilots were paying tribute to the speed and efficiency of the Typhoon. One Spitfire pilot chasing without hope after two F.W.190s spotted two Typhoons, and called them on his radio for help.

'Suddenly there was a woof and the Typhoons overtook me going like a couple of rockets,' he reported. 'Nothing like it has happened before. They went by like an express train. I watched them overtake the Huns and jump on them. One was blown out of the sky right away. The other was damaged but nipped into a cloud and escaped. It was an amazing sight.'

The situation changed overnight. From imminent failure the Typhoon became credited within three months as our newest and most successful fighter.

On February 8, Lord Balfour, the Secretary of State for Air, wrote:

> My Dear Beamont,
>
> I must send you this line to tell you with what wonder and admiration all of us watched your take-off and flying of the Typhoon yesterday. Not only does it impress those like myself, who have not got the knowledge of others, but I wished you could have heard the comments of the Spitfire experts. They said they did not realize the Typhoon could be handled like that. . . .

A month later the Ministry of Information arranged a press conference on the squadron to release the news of the new secret fighter to the public. And in the weeks that followed, press reports of the deeds attributed to Typhoons and their pilots brought interest, amusement and sometimes embarrassment to the squadron breakfast table. Usually the pilots managed to laugh off their sense of outraged modesty at the melodramatic over-emphasis which some popular papers laid upon their actions, but one morning Beamont felt a newspaper had gone beyond the limit of a joke.

The after-effects of the previous night's party were not helping his humour when he arrived in the mess for breakfast, and Van Lierde greeted him cheerfully:

'Allo, sir, Good morning. May I shake hands with a ghost man?'

'Uh?' grunted Beamont.

'Ze ghost man, sir,' repeated Van Lierde shaking his newspaper.

'What the heck are you talking about, Van?'

'You said it, sir. It says so here,' explained Van Lierde. He read from the newspaper. 'Bob Beamont—I didn't know your name was Bob, sir?'

'Nor did I,' said Beamont grimly. 'But then you didn't know your nickname was "Buzz" until you read it, did you, Van? Anyway go on, let's have it.'

' "Bob Beamont," ' read Van Lierde, ' "vaulted from the cockpit and came towards me with one of the largest grins that I have seen in years. 'Shake hands with a ghost man,' he laughed, 'for we are the ghost men of the R.A.F.' " '

'No!' shuddered Beamont, 'Give me that.' He grabbed the paper. There, splashed with headlines and a photograph of himself was the account by the paper's air correspondent of a purported interview. He skimmed through the text quickly snorting aloud some of the phrases that had been put into his mouth: ' ". . . the finest, fastest, most heavily gunned stalker in the R.A.F. . . . our ghost activities . . . we had to remain anonymous".'

'And listen to this. Can you imagine me saying: "We get them like cold turkeys!" I ask you.'

'And this: "a catch-as-can game. . . . Altitude that smears your windscreen with salt from the waves." '

'Where's that "line" book!'

Beamont flung down the paper. 'Honestly, this is going too far!' he protested. 'The whole thing is sheer imagination. This time I'm going to complain to Group.'

Air Ministry took up his complaint but the paper was unrepentant. In fact there was a tone of injured innocence in its reply that the article was written in the interests of the public morale, and that a writer so well known as its air correspondent should be allowed to use his discretion in the means of achieving this praiseworthy object.

Beamont received the explanation with a snort. 'Get them like cold turkeys indeed!' he echoed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TRAIN-BUSTERS

DEFEAT the tip-and-run raider and 609 Squadron could select its own offensive operations, had been the promise of the A.O.C. It was a promise which Beamont had no intention of forgetting, and the immediate successes against the F.W.190s set his mind searching for some additional activity in which the Typhoon's worth could be proved. Stooging up and down the Channel and North Sea, stalking the occasional raiders who trespassed into British skies was a necessary job, but it was a defensive role. Offensive activity—taking the war into enemy territory and meeting him on his own ground—was the stimulus of the fighter pilot's spirit; and it was with envy that he watched the Spitfires sweeping across the Channel to attack the enemy's lines of communication in France and the Low Countries.

The approaching full moon gave him the idea. All these 'rhubarbs', as the attacks on communications were termed, were taking place by day. In consequence the enemy was resorting more and more to cover of darkness for moving both rail and road transport. The previous summer Hurricanes had ground-strafed by moonlight, but those night sweeps ceased when the aircraft became obsolete. Nobody else had continued the work. Why not the Typhoon?

Air Vice-Marshal Saunders was inclined to be sceptical at first. 'Attacking ground targets at night is a difficult and hazardous business,' he said, 'and the Typhoon is an extremely high-performance day fighter. Aren't your pilots going to have difficulty in merely flying the aircraft at night, apart from anything else?'

'I believe, sir,' answered Beamont, 'that the Typhoon is an extremely easy and safe aircraft for night flying and that the rest is just a matter of training. Would you agree, sir, to letting me do two three trial sorties during the present moon period, and basing a final decision on the results?'

'Right, Beamont,' agreed the A.O.C. suppressing a smile at the young officer's enthusiasm. 'Try it out and let me know how you get on.'

Back at Manston Beamont studied maps and flak diagrams of the French coast. There was sure to be traffic on the Calais-Amiens-Paris line, he thought, and he decided to go to Amiens via Le Touquet and the Somme estuary where he knew the landmarks well.

He went out to his aircraft to check the night-flying equipment, and at once ran into snags. The panel lights were dazzling white. They lit up his face and the interior of the cockpit hood so brilliantly that it was impossible to see outside. The one thing they did not light up properly was the instrument panel. Similarly the compass light shed an orange glow on to the floor, but did not shine on the compass.

The ground crew went to work, adjusting and dimming the lights with coats of red dope. Tracer which would be too bright at night and of more aid to the enemy than himself, was taken out of the gun-belts. But the most important modification of all, he realized from his night flying operations in Hurricanes, was a gunsight adaptor.

He telephoned Group. 'The gunsight installed has always proved good enough in daytime,' he was told. 'And there is no reason to suppose it should not be equally satisfactory at night.'

He hung up in disgust. Had the Group armament officer ever personally carried out a night ground attack in anything, he wondered. The whole success of the operation depended upon an efficient night adaptor. Without one, his forward vision would be obscured by the bright orange glare of the sight ring and range bars. Summoning his squadron armament N.C.O., he went to the aircraft and designed a special slide, half an inch in diameter, to fit in the reflector gunsight so that it cut out all light except the sighting bead reflection on the screen ahead.

Everything was ready except the weather. The greatest difficulty, Beamont assessed, was going to be judging the range and angle of approach to an indistinct target. The better the light, the better would be his chances of success; and for the first operation, particularly, he wanted a night of good visibility with little or no cloud to obscure the light of the moon. For three days he contained his growing impatience as heavy low cloud moved in at sunset to ruin the promise of the clear afternoon. Finally on the night of November 17, 1942, when the moon appeared from behind scattered thin cloud in a hazy sky, he decided to wait no longer.

Conditions were perfect, but over the Channel his hopes fell as cloud built up into a solid bank below him at 2,000 feet. He crossed the enemy coast without seeing it, and consoled himself that on the other hand the cloud was also effectively preventing opposition from the coastal searchlight units and flak batteries. Two miles inland the cloud bank ended and France spread below, veiled in a ground haze.

Losing height he turned south for the Somme estuary and picked out a small patch of light smoke where he knew the railway to be. He banked vertically to get the possible target in view, but the sky was already darkening with more cloud. And then both moon and horizon, too, were gone, and he had to finish his turn on instruments. He dived back towards St. Valery and with a contrast that dazzled his eyes, broke again into hazy moonlight. Straining ahead he picked out the glint of rails and then the path of smoke again, a patch drawn and elongated into a trail. To make doubly sure he did a diving turn round it at 320 m.p.h. It was a goods train with box-like coaches, travelling fast towards Abbeville.

Keeping the trail of smoke in sight over his left shoulder, he switched on the gunsight and set his guns to the firing position. Already the smoke from the railway engine was dwindling fast.

The preliminary dive had been a mistake. He had given himself away, and already the smoke from the railway engine was dwindling fast. He would be lucky if he could reach the engine before the steam had been completely cut off and the target lost altogether.

Throttle back, he went into the attack in a long shallow dive at 200 miles an hour. Height dropped steadily back—1,000 . . . 800 . . . 600 feet. No more than the thinnest streak of white across the greys and blacks of the countryside was left to guide him now. No more than a wisp betrayed the existence of the train. He ruddered the gunsight on to the source of the steam and sighted high to allow for the inevitable nose drop. A pity, he noted critically, that there was such a narrow vertical angle of vision from the Typhoon cockpit. It made getting a sight on to a ground target so much more difficult.

Flashes at the cannon muzzles on either wing split the quiet darkness and touched off ahead a flickering mosaic of exploding shells which silhouetted in sharp relief the permanent way, the hedgerows, the long line of coaches from which a crackle of small-arms fire was spitting back at him. For two and a half seconds he held the burst until the engine, spattered by the brilliant blobs of exploding cannon shells seemed to take wing. Larger and larger it loomed, catapulting to meet him, until he was suddenly aware that the train was too large, much too large. He had misjudged the range in the darkness, and was on the point of crashing into it.

He pulled back urgently on the stick, lifting the nose. A blurred ribbon of coaches and engine streamed by under the wing, and then he was clear, banking in a climbing turn over the Somme estuary. He brushed an arm across his forehead. Phew! That had been far too close. He would have to watch his judgment of range at night.

Behind him the cloud of escaping steam bore evidence that the engine had been badly hit, and marked the target unmistakably for the next attack. He wondered idly as he made the circuit what it must have been like on the train. Obviously from the small-arms fire there were troops aboard. Had he killed any? He hoped that the driver, who was probably a subjugated Frenchman, had escaped. At least that first inexpedient reconnaissance dive should have given him plenty of time to get away.

His musings broke off as with violent unexpectedness shade was stripped from night and he was pinned in the cross of two searchlights. Chains of coloured tracer shells sped past his cockpit. He had swung round too wide in his circuit and blundered over St. Valery at under 2,000 feet. For a moment he felt naked and helpless, exposed in a blinding whiteness that shocked his stomach and prickled his scalp. But the moment of paralysis was fleeting. In the same instant he was instinctively diving at full throttle for the ground, twisting and turning violently as he went.

The incessant stream of gunfire barely entered his consciousness. He was below the apex and it was bursting far behind, but in any case no flak could induce the same feeling of intimidation as those webs of cold, impersonal light.

Trees and countryside blossomed into floodlit radiance as the searchlight beams dropped almost to horizontal to hold the plunging aircraft. He could go no lower. Levelling out, he skimmed the Typhoon over the roofs and treetops, twisting, snaking, weaving, as he raced to out-distance the searchlights.

Then, as quickly as they had come on, they snapped off, and he was helpless in blackness until his eyes grew acclimatized and recovered their vision.

He was clammy with sweat, the only evidence of that encounter already half-forgotten in a night peaceful again with false tranquillity. No longer the hunted, Beamont returned again to to the role of the hunter. He had lost all idea where the target lay. His compass told him he was heading south so he turned on to a northerly course until he picked up the Somme. This time taking especial pains to avoid St. Valery, he searched the landscape. There was no difficulty in finding the train. Escaping steam pinpointed the target for miles around.

He attacked again, approaching at right angles and firing all the way down in a dive from five hundred down to fifty feet at a range of eighty yards. Shell bursts raked the length of the train, fusing two dull red explosions in one of the coaches, and forcing more clouds of white steam from the engine. He circled low to try to check the damage. More intermittent smouldering red explosions erupted in the middle of the coaches and the engine was lost from sight, transformed into a convulsion of spurting steam.

There was no sign of life, and no small-arms fire from the coaches had greeted him on this run. The train was deserted, and both coaches and engine so badly damaged that there seemed little need to do any more. And yet he felt a sense of anti-climax. He had hoped perhaps for more graphic evidence of the result of his work: to see the engine blow up, or the train burst into flames.

For the sake of the experience the target offered in judging range and experimenting with angles of approach, he made three more attacks, peppering the train with the now familiar pattern of shell flashes. At the end of the fifth run the picture was still the same, the engine enveloped in the light greyish cloud of steam and the rest of the train lost once more in the peaceful shadows of the countryside.

Four nights later when the weather cleared sufficiently to let him try another lone sortie, Beamont had his reward of a colourful climax. From fifty feet he attacked a long stationary train in the marshalling yards of Abbeville. Immediately steam gushed from the engine. He attacked again; and this time the tender burst into flames, and the engine erupted into a spout of smoke and steam which rose high into the sky.

Finishing his remaining ammunition on the long train of low trucks and heading north, he set course for base, satisfied beyond doubt that he had found a new vocation for the Typhoon.

He explained the position frankly to his pilots. The Typhoon was a high-performance day fighter, and they were already doing all that was required of them in their coastal patrols. Night intruding operations to the Continent would therefore be an extra assignment beyond normal duties and consequently an entirely voluntary undertaking. In fact no pilot would be allowed to go on an intruder operation until he had reached a sufficient level of night flying in the Typhoon: a standard which included a minimum of two two-hundred mile moonlight cross-country flights without wireless aid, and two sorties of low flying practice, also by moonlight, in the Dungeness area.

'Once we have proved ourselves as night intruders,' Beamont finished enthusiastically, with his next goal already in mind, 'how will Command possibly be able to maintain that ground-strafing by day is Spitfire's work, and unsuitable for us?'

That night, pilots who had returned at dusk from the usual defensive patrols against tip-and-run raiders, swallowed their supper and were back at the Flight offices making the most of the remaining moon period to practise circuits and landings.

Beamont was striving to prove the worth of the Typhoon, but he was also working hard to prove himself fit to command a squadron. In his mind the two—new aircraft and new squadron commander—had become bound up indistinguishably. Failure of one must reflect upon the other: and he looked upon the potential threat of the failure of the Typhoon in the light of a personal challenge, placing his own position in jeopardy.

Following the success of his solo intruding Beamont approached Group again about night-flying modifications for the Typhoon. Still he met with the same blank disinterest, and an attitude that said Beamont had chosen of his own will to go on these operations, so let him get on with it. On the strength of the A.O.C.'s sanction he might have created a fuss about the absence of co-operation, but night intruding was 'his baby', he decided possessively: he would nurse it himself. He put the squadron armoury to work, making more of the small metal slides which he had designed as improvised night adaptors for the gunsight; and to ease the problem of the narrow vertical angle of vision, he had the windscreen de-misting panel removed and the gunsight reflected directly on to the windscreen.

Excitement ran high as the December moon grew bigger. There was hardly a pilot who had not completed the stipulated programme of night-flying training, and was not eager to take part in the squadron's first composite night 'rhubarb'. Skies were clear and starlit, and on December 12, Beamont decided that there would be sufficient light from the moon the following night for operations to begin. He drew up a programme for six sorties starting at 7 p.m., and studied the squadron strength and commitments with misgivings.

The squadron had twenty-two pilots of whom four were away on regular leave, and two more were sick. That left sixteen pilots to bear the load of maintaining two aircraft continually on patrol during the eleven hours from dawn to dusk. The best he could do was to arrange the roster so that the five pilots nominated to join him on the night intruder operations finished their patrols by mid-day, and did not go on duty again until the following afternoon. Much as he wished to do so, there was no chance of giving the pilots a full day's rest after the night operations.

Beamont took off first that night. The air was cold and clear, and the moon still low, throwing elongated shadows of chimney stacks. Conditions were perfect. He had done this intruding before. He knew what it would be like, and yet it was as if he were setting out for the first time. So much depended upon that night. His faith would either be justified or shattered, and at no one else's door could failure be laid. For once he was not carrying out orders: he was leading his squadron into a battle of his own choosing, and if there were disaster and casualties he knew he would never be able to escape a sense of personal blame.

Brusquely he rebuked himself. He had every confidence, every faith in his objective and in his men. He had seen how their spirits had risen since the squadron's move to Manston, and the added zeal and enthusiasm which the prospect of this operation had inspired during the past three weeks. Van Lierde was but one example of the metamorphosis that had taken place. A quiet, almost surly man at Duxford, he was now always cheerful, always eager to fly, and full of suggestions for operations that would realise his emphatic desire to get to grips with the enemy.

The tranquillity of that other world soothed Beamont's apprehensions. It was a world which he could enter each and every day. A world where the air was clean and clear of the troubles and disorders of civilization, and the earth a carpet of colours and contours, shadow and shades. Usually he knew it as a sunlit world of cloud and valleys and mountains, but tonight, though it had turned over to give the thrill of setting out alone under moon and stars, it was still the same world: the world of flying.

He could see the line of the enemy coast ahead now. The demarcation between peace and order, and the sanctioned lawlessness of flashing, thudding guns in his wings, prying searchlights, and the red, green and white festoons of searing flak. Soon he was across the coast, deep into enemy skies, and he was no longer a man who loved to fly for the sake of flying. He was a twentieth century hawk with no thought for anything but his prey of iron and steam.

Beamont got one train that night. Four single bursts brought the large engine, drawing the train of ten open, and two closed, trucks, to a standstill in a bright flash followed by clouds of billowing steam. Lallemand reported strikes and escaping steam from a goods train, but had to leave the attack unfinished because of cannon stoppage. De Salis and Renier brought a troop train to a standstill in a mass of smoke and steam. German soldiers ran from it to cover, and swooping the length of the train to fire among them, de Salis flew so low that he carried away the telegraph wires and returned with a damaged wing and several yards of wire in his radiator scoop.

The campaign which was to earn the squadron the name of 'The Train-busters' and carry it to the front rank of Fighter Command had begun. Locomotives blew up in vivid, yellow white, flashes or died in clouds of gasping steam. Goods trains were raked from stem to stern. Night no longer gave Hitler immunity in moving his troops and supplies, but with the intensity of daylight sweeps, night was all that was left to him. Armoured flak wagons were fitted behind the engines on all important trains but they failed to produce the results. In achieving its first century of 'busted' trains, 609 Squadron lost only two pilots.

But train-busting was restricted to moonlight periods, and those periods were much too short for Beamont and his pilots. The month had too many days of inactive routine patrols, waiting hopefully, but more often unavailingly, now that the F.W.190s had discovered that they had met the match of their speed in the Typhoon. And all the time during the patrols, the enemy coast was in sight, a tantalizing reminder of the opportunities in the skies beyond.

Beamont could stand it no longer. He had tried both the normal channels of Sector and Group, and received the routine formula, 'Right, Beamont, I'll see what I can do,' which often presaged immediate forgetfulness. The A.O.C. had invited Beamont to let him know how he fared in these night intruder trials. That was his opportunity.

He flew to Uxbridge Headquarters to give his report. The A.O.C. listened attentively to the account of the intruder operations, but when Beamont turned to the subject of the boredom of the daylight patrols and the value, both in squadron morale and in destruction of enemy transport, of occasional daylight strafing sorties during the non-moon period, he began to smile. Air Vice-Marshal Saunders made a habit of not only tolerating but encouraging individual initiative in his subordinate commanders.

'Very well,' he said, giving Beamont an almost free hand to operate his squadron in this role, as and how he wished, 'the same rule applies as in the case of night intruder operations.

If you can provide aircraft over and above your patrol commitments you may send occasional sorties on "rhubarbs". You can plan the sorties yourself, but they must be approved the afternoon before by the Intruder Operations Staff.'

The one man who did not take kindly to the A.O.C.'s consent to this additional activity was the squadron medical officer. In his opinion the squadron had taken on twice as much work as it should have done. Pilots were flying their ordinary commitments of defensive patrols in order to earn the right to take part in intruder operations, in the offensive warfare that they wanted to wage. Either duty was sufficient for any man. Both together were too much.

More than once he cautioned Beamont: 'You can't burn the candle at both ends. Three sorties a day, or one sortie at night are reasonable, but sorties by day and night over prolonged periods are definitely not.'

Beamont listened and agreed, and carried on with his programme until the end of February when bad weather called a halt to a moon period of intensive activity which had credited the squadron with twenty-seven trains, of which Beamont personally had accounted for fourteen. The rest in the M.O.'s view had come none too soon, and now in the lull pilots discovered how tired they were. At nights the mess was surprisingly deserted as with one mind they took to their beds to sleep off exhaustion.

A few early nights and days of drowsing round the fire in the dispersal hut quickly dissipated the strain. Before long pilots, restless at being grounded, were grumbling at the low cloud which had settled on the coastal hills and cliffs and had suspended patrols.

Wind whipping the sleet against the windows of the dispersal hut made March 9 look like yet another day of no flying; but at 4 p.m. Operations unexpectedly telephoned that the weather was clearing and they wanted a patrol to take off.

'I'll take this one,' said Beamont promptly. 'Van, you'll be my number two.'

Grabbing his kit he ran across the wet tarmac shouting to the ground crews to start up aircraft 'L' and 'G'. The gale was bitterly cold and he was glad to get the door and windows of the cockpit shut. His fitter slid off the wing. From the high ground of the east-west runway he had a view of low cloud racing across Pegwell Bay and Deal, a dreary, windswept landscape that promised a bumpy flight. He checked that Van Lierde was ready, and opened the throttle.

Immediately they were airborne, the Typhoons began to jolt and bounce in the violent air currents. There should be less bumps over the sea, Beamont was hoping optimistically, when Van Lierde's voice came over the radio telephone.

'Hello Crooner leader. You are leaving a white smoke trail.'

'O.K. Blue two. It's probably an over-filled glycol tank blowing off.' This did sometimes happen, and the coolant tank was fitted with a relief valve as a precaution against expansion with heat when over-filled.

They roared low across Deal and out over the Channel with England quickly swallowed in sleet and cloud. Again Van Lierde reported smoke from Beamont's aircraft, but they had been flying only a few minutes and he contented himself with keeping a careful check on the engine instruments.

The storm spread across the Channel, and in the mist and rain the other Typhoon, a few hundred yards away, became a dim blur hardly recognizable. Definitely good Focke Wulfe weather. He turned a few degrees to head for a landfall at Mardyck. There was always a chance of finding an enemy aircraft over the French coast.

Settling down on his new course, he glanced again at the engine instruments. His breath caught in his throat. Half hypnotized he stared at the radiator temperature gauge. The needle had jumped from ninety to a hundred degrees, and was still rising. As it registered one hundred and ten degrees, he knew that there was no longer any doubt. He was in trouble. The white vapour seen by Van Lierde had not been a safety valve blow off, but a coolant leak, and so much of the coolant had been lost that the remainder was near to boiling. When that happened the engine would seize and probably catch fire.

Turning back for England he called Control. 'This is Crooner leader. I have bad engine trouble and am heading for Deal. Afraid I'll have to ditch.'

'Hello Crooner leader. O.K. Have notified Air Sea Rescue. Good luck.'

He had, he judged, three to four minutes' flying before the engine was likely to seize, and at two hundred miles an hour it would take at least five minutes to reach the nearest point on the Kent coast. He considered using the remaining power to climb to a safe height for baling out, but with only twenty minutes to sunset the chances of surviving a winter night in a rubber dinghy in that savage, raging sea, seemed even less promising than those of ditching the Typhoon. If he did get out of the aircraft in time, he would be so much nearer the coast, and his likelihood of being picked up would be all the greater. And at the back of his mind clung the insupportable hope that somehow he might manage to reach the coast.

It was surprising how clear his brain had become now that the emergency had to be faced. His six months' test flying experience at Hawker's was standing him in good stead. Instead of the instinctive desire to counter crisis by escaping from it, he was rapidly analyzing cause and effect and reasoning out the correct action to save, firstly, the aircraft.

He climbed to five hundred feet to give himself sufficient height to turn into wind when the moment for crash-landing on the sea arrived, but meanwhile he concentrated on means of reducing engine temperatures. He opened the radiator cooling flap, and reduced engine revolutions to a minimum. His speed had fallen to 150 m.p.h., but the temperature gauge too had dropped to 108 degrees and the needle was stable. For a whole minute the needle did not move and he was filled with an upsurge of hope. Perhaps after all, he was going to escape that cold, tempestuous sea, which was whipping itself into a fury ahead. Then he realized that the patch of frothing whiteness marked the Goodwins: only eight miles to go.

The temperatures began to rise again. The aircraft was sluggish and heavy at the comparatively low speed, and he juggled urgently with the engine controls, trying to find the best combination for coolest running. His eyes never left the temperature gauge: 115 degrees . . . 120 . . . 125. The needle was jumping as the coolant boiled.

He tightened the crash straps, lowered the seat and looked ahead. Nothing in sight, nothing but cloud and rain and sea, the violent, angry sea. Better to go down cross-wind than head into wind against those breakers which would come swamping into that big radiator intake before the Typhoon had time to settle on the surface. He was very conscious now of all the other pilots who had attempted to land Typhoons on the sea. Except for that miraculous escape of the pilot who had come up from the bottom, they had all been killed, even in comparatively calm seas.

Curving back out of rain came the other Typhoon, and Van Lierde's excited Belgian accent shouted empatically in his ears:

'Allo, Crooner leader. Bale out for Christ's sake! Bale out. You are pouring out white stuff. You will never make it. Bale out. Bale out!'

But now his straining eyes had picked out the cliffs, rising like a mirage above the water: two miles, three miles away, surely no more. Sweat gathered in the palms of his gloved hands and his heart thumped painfully. Still the engine temperature rose. With violent oscillations the radiator temperature jerked past 135 degrees centigrade. Any moment now, and the cliffs still two miles away.

He switched on his microphone: 'Hello, Control. This is Crooner leader. Rad temperature off the clock. Should ditch just off Standgate. Off.'

Beamont no longer had any illusions. He was certain he was going to die, frightened that the water would be unpleasantly cold. In a diary note written soon after the accident, he gives his own contemporary impressions of the first stage of the crash:

> I felt myself saying over and over again: 'Oh well this is it.' One was not frightened of the act, only of the anticipation. Many people had found that out before me.
>
> I thought. There goes the oil temperature too. Clouds of smoke from the exhaust now. A bad sign that. Oh, why don't you stop, you bloody engine? My God, the cliffs. It's either into them or arrive among the rocks and breakers at 100 m.p.h. She's still flying, there's just a chance. Stick back a little. We're over!
>
> There goes the motor. God, the fumes. She's on fire. Get the switches off. Height 150 feet. I.A.S. 145 m.p.h. Have to put her down straight ahead in that wood. No! just

> cleared it. Oh Christ, a village. 130 m.p.h. Mind the church. A field between those trees. Hell, it's the side of a hill. Flaps down, more rudder, but don't stall her you fool. Trim the nose back. Mind the gunsight. Back . . . back . . . Crr-r-ash.
>
> It seemed that after the first blinding flash, as my head hit the gunsight, only a few seconds elapsed before I was fumbling with the door handle, and then half crawling, half sliding down on to the wing, and finally the soft brown earth where I remained for some moments on hands and knees, wondering what it was that dripped slowly on the ground in front of me.
>
> In fact. as I did discover later, some five or six minutes elaspsed before I recovered sufficient consciousness to move, and it was more than lucky that the local fire, which had started in the engine bay, died out.
>
> I could hear the whining of the generator which I had had no time to switch off, and considered getting up to do so. But this was altogether too much effort, and I compromised with myself by lying down completely and indulging in peaceful contemplation of the sky until something or someone should occur.

The field in which he had landed was on the side of a hill, and with tail well down the Typhoon had fortunately struck at an angle coincident with the slope. Ploughing into the earth it had decelerated from eighty miles an hour to standstill within a few yards. The harness straps had been unable to hold against the force of the impact, and Beamont had gashed his forehead badly against the gunsight.

Through the haze he vaguely made out two faces bending over him, and feeling suddenly ridiculous, he clambered unsteadily to his feet.

'Take it easy, old chap,' a voice said. 'You've had a nasty smack. We'll get you down to the farm.'

'I'm all right,' Beamont insisted. 'I can manage.' For a moment he stared at the Typhoon, flat and crumpled on its belly. It was still smoking. Perhaps he thought idly, he should switch off the generator. But then there was weight on his arms as the two farm workers gripped them firmly. Half held up, he was walking without conscious movement of his feet. There was just the growing leaden pressure under his arms. And then the voice again saying: 'Ah! I thought he was getting pretty heavy.' And the pressure was no more.

The pressure had gone and there was nothing else. Nothing until a coolness, a refreshing coolness spreading over his head and face; and paradise was just to lie and accept that soft, soothing, coolness, and ask for nothing else. But he had to open his eyes, and when he did, the two men's faces had become a woman's. He was in a house and a woman was gently bathing his face.

She smiled, and he struggled to apologize as if the mess and trouble were his personal fault.

'Now don't be silly,' she said. 'Just lie quietly.'

Even in his bemused state it seemed excellent advice, an extraordinarily pleasant thing, just to lie there and do nothing. He closed his eyes, but this time a throbbing was growing in his head. He wished it would go away. It must be all these people crowding into the room. People whom he could not see but who existed in muffled snatches of conversation. As though it were another person he heard himself assuring a policeman that it was no trouble to get his identity card. Fumbling with buttons and zip fastener, he drew out his wallet sticky with blood.

Time slowed down. He had long forgotten about the wallet and identity card when from a long way off the constable was thanking him, and telling him the ambulance was on its way from Manston.

The throbbing was getting worse, a hammering trying to split his skull, and he stiffened trying to resist it. But he knew that was wrong. Relax, relax. Like flying an aircraft. Relax and go with it.

And then he knew the Air Force was there. McIver, the Squadron Leader, Admin.—the first time he had seen him without a cheerful grin on his round face. Even the Doc, McKeckney, looking pale and worried and unlike his usual self, though his hands and his words brought confidence and reassurance. 'Just a wee cut and a dint in the skull, sir. Och! you're going to have a wonderful pair of black eyes tomorrow! . . . Hypo, please, sergeant.'

A luxurious warmth crept through his body carrying away the pain in his head. He knew he was on a stretcher. He wanted so much to thank the farmer and his wife. It worried him that he had not thanked them as the ambulance carried him to Deal hospital.

A hospital. In dismay he struggled to protest. He did not want to go to hospital. Why not Sick Quarters?

'Now it's just for a few days,' crooned McKeckney. 'They'll look after you well here, and we haven't the facilities at the Station.'

McKeckney had gone. Nurses were undressing him. There were towels, and water and more washing. A moment's embarrassment forgotten in the quick, impersonal efficiency. And then McKeckney was back with a civilian doctor. There was a jabbing and pulling at his forehead as the stitches were put in, and a delicious drowsiness carrying him to the peace of nothingness.

He awoke twelve hours later with eyes swollen and streaming, but apart from the difficulty in seeing, he felt well enough. The X-rays taken whilst he slept showed, however, a small fracture of the skull. He had to resign himself to a week in bed to cure the concussion.

'You had better make up your mind that you will not be flying for at least a month,' the hospital doctor warned him as his impatience grew. But Beamont had other ideas. On the eighth day after the crash he returned to Manston, a ghoulish sight of white face and bloodshot eyes set in a mess of purple and yellow puffiness.

'Now, I'm your M.O., sir,' said McKeckney firmly. 'You'll just get straight off home on three weeks' sick leave and then we'll see how you are.'

But a week later Beamont was back at Manston. The moon period was approaching.

CHAPTER IX

SWEEPING THE MINESWEEPERS

THE M.O. protested and gave up. What was the use when the patient put on the blarney and argued that he had come back to be under the M.O.'s eye? And, of course, the M.O. knew nothing about the circus with the Whirlwind fighter bombers until Beamont, still white of face and with yellowish bruises round the eyes, was back on the ground.

When Humphrey Coghlan, who had the Whirlwind bomber squadron which occupied the other side of Manston, telephoned four days after his return, Beamont congratulated himself on the nicety of his timing. He would have hated to stay on sick leave and miss this.

'We're having a dice at Abbeville marshalling yards this evening,' Coghlan said. 'I suggested you'd probably like to escort us, and Group have O.K.'d the idea, if that's all right with you?'

'Fine,' said Beamont. 'Can't have outsiders muscling in on Manston's war. What time? Rendezvous 1645 hours Dungeness, deck level. O.K. Time for a chat about it over tea, then? Right, see you in the mess. Thanks for the custom.'

Because of the greater time they would take to reach the rendezvous point, the Whirlwinds left some minutes before the Typhoons. Sitting in his cockpit, Beamont watched them go, the sun shimmering on their propellers as they took off in pairs, each with two 500-pound bombs slung under the wings.

One by one the Typhoons crackled and spluttered into a roar; and with the last pair of Whirlwinds folding their wheels back into the engine nacelles as they passed the eastern hangar, Beamont led his squadron over the bumpy grass to the runway.

Sweeping low in a left hand turn over Ramsgate, the nine

Typhoons drew into vee formation and he set course for Dungeness at 280 m.p.h. Across the countryside of Kent, brilliantly green in cloudless sunlight, past the grey dignity of Canterbury Cathedral, and over the hills at Lympne to Romney Marshes they hurried, with Beamont checking all the time on his watch. The technique of bringing formations of aircraft flying at more than two hundred miles an hour to a rendezvous point called for split-second accuracy if time and fuel were not to be wasted in circling and waiting. The time of starting-up, taxying, take off, formating, and the flight itself, had to add up to zero hour with discrepancies adjusted by increasing or decreasing speed on the last leg.

Specks appeared in the sky ahead. Beamont glanced again at his watch: forty-five seconds to 16.45 hours, and the Whirlwinds were half a mile ahead, just where they were expected, heading over the pebble beach of Dymchurch for the lighthouse on the point.

Beamont called Coghlan on r/t. 'Hello Whirley leader. O.K. Coming up on your starboard side now.'

'O.K. Crooner leader. Setting course now.'

Slowly the whole formation turned south, the Typhoons gently moving into position. The yellow beaches and white pebbles slid behind, and for a hundred miles there was nothing but the intense blue of the sea.

For the Typhoon it was a slow flight, cruising at 40 m.p.h. less than their normal speed. And when the time came to start climbing and the speed of the Whirlwinds with their bomb loads dropped back to 180 m.p.h., the Typhoons were continually tending to overtake. Beamont had to make still wider weaving turns to keep his squadron in position behind, and 2,000 feet above the bombers.

Steadily the formation gained height and the estuary of the Somme appeared on the horizon. Now they're plotting us by radar, Beamont thought, if they weren't already doing so when we were low.

He checked his time again. Twelve minutes to the target. Would a reception committee be awaiting them he wondered? The Hun would have plenty of time to send up the F.W.190s from Abbeville Drucat. Strange to think that that smallest and roughest

French aerodrome, at which he had landed in January, 1940, now had long concrete runways.

There was sure to be heavy flak from the target, he anticipated. Better keep the squadron well south of the town and dive after the Whirlwinds as they came out.

Still climbing at 10,000 feet they approached the south side of the Somme estuary. Somewhat surprised he saw that the Whirlwinds were tracking straight over St. Valery. Now for the flak, he told himself.

There it came, the *wumph-wumph* which was felt, rather than heard. And then a loud crack of sound warned of a shell-burst unpleasantly close. Clusters of three and five black grapes, like the aces of spades and clubs, were growing in the sky around the formation. Mostly they were behind and below, but some of the pilots were flying a bit wildly and Beamont called them quickly: 'Hello, Crooner aircraft. Stop charging about the sky and get together. Don't let a little flak bother you.'

He pinpointed the narrowing of the estuary and its merging into the Abbeville canal which led to the town and marshalling yards eight miles inland. This was the danger area. His neck chafed on his collar-band as he searched the sky in every direction. His eyes hesitated on a spot to the west of the centre of the sun: thin curling wisps—yes, unmistakably vapour trails.

The same instant his earphones crackled. 'Hello, Crooner leader, have information for you,' reported Operations. 'Four plus bandits, probably more, 25,000 feet, east of Le Tréport, travelling north-west.'

Beamont acknowledged, and warned the squadron: 'Keep an eye on those trails at one o'clock. They're too high for us at the moment, but they may come down, so get together and stay together.'

The bombers were fanning out from vee formation into the slanting echelon from which they would peel off to attack.

Half a minute to target. Upon the final line of approach taken during those last few seconds by Coghlan, would depend the accuracy of the attacks by each of his aircraft.

Away they went. Rapidly dwindling specks diving into the ground haze, and Beamont conscious only of his responsibility both to maintain contact with the Whirlwinds, and prevent them from being surprised by enemy fighters during that most vulnerable period of breaking and regaining formation. Time was not slow enough for all that had to be crowded into those vital seconds. Watch the Whirlwinds, watch his own squadron, watch for fighters. Look up, look down, look ahead, look behind, look on either side, look everywhere, all at the same time. Give radio instructions, look everywhere; dodge flak, look everywhere; watch his own squadron formation, look everywhere, watch the Whirlwinds. . . .

By this time the first mushrooms of heavy flak from the target were bursting among the Whirlwinds as they ran across Abbeville at 12,000 feet. Beamont veered his Typhoons a few degrees south to keep in check the group of vapour trails which had moved directly above them. In a few moments he would have to turn to port, down sun, and put the Typhoons at a disadvantage which the Hun was generally quick to turn to good account.

The last Whirlwind rolled into a vertical dive for the marshalling yards of Abbeville, trailing two vertical ropes of black smoke from the cannon that was also being pumped into its target on the way down. Following to pick up the bombers, Beamont led the Typhoons into the thick of it. Flak came at them continuously from the marshalling yards and the hills above the town. A wake of hundred of puffs of grey smoke charted their path in the cloudless sky.

For a moment the sputtering pattern of the Whirlwinds' bomb bursts caught his attention; but in watching them he lost track of the vapour trails. Furiously he searched the sky until the radio relieved his anxiety with the news that the enemy fighters had thought better of joining the fray, and were over Amiens, heading east. But though there was no need to bother about them, he had no chance of relaxing for some time yet.

Weaving gently, Beamont tried to sum up the situation. In the air there was no sign of anything but Typhoons and shellbursts. Below, a pall of smoke blotted out Abbeville's marshalling yards, and the Whirlwinds were clear, streaking along the canal.

'O.K. Crooner aircraft. Opening up and diving a little. Keep an eye on the sun.'

Spasmodic bursts of flak followed them as the Typhoons swung towards the coast, a few thousand feet above the last two or three Whirlwinds. Then they were over the sea, heading into the sunset for home. One of the Whirlwinds was in trouble and flying on one engine. Gradually, leaving a trail of smoke, it dropped behind.

The radio broke the still peace of the evening haze, glowing orange in the light of the setting sun.

'Hello, Crooner leader. I have a special target for you. If you would like it, steer 045 degrees for fifteen minutes.'

Beamont considered the course quickly. It would take them to the neighbourhood of Cap Gris Nez. That sounded more like a naval target than aircraft. He checked his fuel gauges; fifty-five minutes' flying left.

'O.K. Control. I'd love it. I'll leave a section with Whirley leader and take the rest on 045 degrees now.'

With somewhat mixed feelings he turned the formation up-Channel in the failing light. Only a few moments before he had been heaving private sighs of relief at having weathered the flak and carried out the mission successfully. Now, it was to be done all over again.

Visibility was difficult. The sun, bright red, was resting on the edge of the sea and threw its rays in a long path of dazzling reflection across the water. Beyond that path there was nothing but a blank wall of mist.

Between Dungeness and Le Touquet he called Control: 'Crooner leader here. Continuing 045 degrees. Shall need more help if I am to find anything in this murk. Over.'

'Hello Crooner leader. O.K. Have more gen for you. Targets on water three miles offshore between Boulogne and Le Touquet. Steer 095 degrees and you should see them almost immediately. There are at least twelve. There are also twelve plus bandits over Calais, angels two, heading your way.'

In a gradual descent he wheeled on to the new course. He had been right: a naval target. Most probably M.T.B.'s—E-boats as the Germans called them—or, perhaps, minesweepers. Whatever they were, a dozen or more would provide a warm reception. And twelve plus enemy fighters too! Well, they hadn't enough fuel to deal with them as well.

'O.K. Crooner aircraft, opening up a bit. Keep a very sharp look out below.'

More instructions from Control, and then less than a mile ahead, there they were, two parallel formations of ten, fifteen, and more, R-type motor minesweepers, stretching out into the mist in the north.

Beamont turned back into the sun on to a similar course to the enemy's. Against the roar of the minesweepers' own heavy engines it was just possible that the Typhoons had not been heard and were still unobserved. If that were so, he might as well attack from the eye of the setting sun using the advantage of its glare and the element of surprise.

'Hello Crooner squadron. Crooner leader here. Target on our port side now. Attacking to port in thirty seconds. One good attack each, and then straight away on the deck. Attack the targets which I go for, and we may sink them. Line astern for attack. Go!'

The R-boats slid back into view, grim black outlines against a hazy, grey sea, as Beamont turned smoothly into a dive back towards the ships.

The speed raced up from 290 to 320 m.p.h. The Typhoon steadied into the dive. Beamont lined his gunsight on the first silhouette, and gulped. In front of him the flotilla stretched out in line ahead. Twenty ships at least, and each with two 20mm. pom-poms, in addition to numerous machine-guns.

'O.K. boys. Here we go!'

Pushing the throttle wide, he crouched forward, concentrating mind and body on the nearest ship as it grew larger and larger in the luminous cross of the gunsight. Twinkling lights brought a sharp relief to the dark silhouette. Immediately their reflection was caught up and passed back and forth amongst the other ships until it looked as if the flotilla were under invasion by a swarm of dancing fireflies. The fraction of the second seemed an age before his mind recognized them as flashes from the gun muzzles.

He crouched lower. 'I mustn't be hit,' he willed. 'I must not be shot down. At this speed and so low. No chance at all.'

And then the sky was full of curving, weaving, criss-crossing coloured lines of tracer shells from every ship in range. Red lights and green lights, travelling slowly at first, then accelerating with terrifying speed as they converged, drawn like magnets to his cockpit, but at the last minute veering unaccountably to flash astern.

The range was closing rapidly. A crack and a jolt jerked the minesweeper away from his sights. He knew he had been hit, but the aircraft was still flying and answered to the rudder as he skidded the ship back into his sights. Now he could see the foam creaming away from her bows. He squeezed the gun button.

He felt the recoil of the cannon in his wings, shaking the aircraft and stirring his blood with an excitement more intense than he had ever known. An excitement sharpened by the weight of the odds against him. An excitement of power and terror. An indescribable feeling with every sensation crammed into the whirl of those last seconds as the dive raced to its climax.

Spurts of white foam gushed in the water yards ahead of the minesweeper. His first burst had fallen short. He raised the nose and rammed his thumb hard on the firing button again, pressing as though the harder he pressed, the harder would be his fire. He was keeping his thumb there, holding the burst right the way through. Nothing would take his thumb off the button. Flak tore at him, jerking, jarring the aircraft again, but still he kept firing, firing all the way down, with the sea ripped into splashes, smothering, engulfing the R-boat. And then through the mass of spume he saw the shell-bursts spreading over the deck, racing up the superstructure. He fought to keep the sights there, to keep the luminous orange cross centred on the target. Flashes, and bursts upon bursts, and more flashes, and then smoke. Smoke! His heart rose with the smoke, and fear had gone out of the excitement, and the thrill was the thrill only of joy and exaltation.

But there was no time to rejoice, no time to consider. The masts were upon him and he was urgently pulling back on the stick, leapfrogging clear to find the next minesweeper suddenly in his sights at seven hundred yards' range. This time there was no mistake, no finding the aim. So low that the fire was almost horizontal, he blasted the hull, broadside from stern to stem. Again the concentration on aim and the infatuating sight of shell-bursts flickering aross the target, held him until it was almost too late, and he had to bank furiously to miss the prow.

Banking to port, banking quickly to starboard, weaving and hugging as close as he dare to the wave tops whilst pom-pom shells shattered viciously above his head. Jerking and twisting, he raced out of enemy gun range at 350 m.p.h.

Life suddenly slowed and quietened. He closed the throttle and looked round, and the chill of fear caught up with him once again. He had just passed through that? Could anyone fly through that criss-cross network of shell-fire and live?

But one by one the Typhoons were speeding through the flak and adding their own quota to the damage and confusion amongst the minesweepers and flakships, which, no longer a well-drilled flotilla, darted madly at top speed in all directions. From the southern end of the area three columns of heavy smoke rose into the sky.

The whole attack into which the sensations of a lifetime had been crammed, had lasted a bare minute. Five Typhoons were already closing in behind him, and as Beamont waited for the other two, his radio came to life again with Control reporting the bandits at Boulogne. 'Can you do anything about them?'

'Sorry,' Beamont replied. 'We're right out of ammunition.' Pity, he thought to himself, that everything has to happen at once.

He pressed the transmitter. 'Good show chaps. Now let's get out of here. Anyone not in touch with me steer oh-one-oh for base and keep going fast until you reach the coast.'

Two voices broke together on the air. Peter Raw's quiet, resigned report: 'Blue one. My motor is missing badly. It looks as if I'll have to ditch. I'm on your starboard side now.'

And Van Lierde's emphatic, furious indignation: 'Allo Crooner leader. Green one, 'ere. I've been 'it! I'ave been 'it! My number two is with me. I continue to base independently.

'O.K. Green one. Call Control on Button C for emergency homing. Go straight in to land when you get home. Over.'

Beamont looked round and saw Peter Raw's aircraft a few hundred yards away. It was leaving a trail of black smoke that was ominous indeed. The cliffs of the North Foreland were already in sight, and despatching the remainder to base independently, he turned back to escort Blue One.

'Head straight for land, Peter,' he advised. 'You are leaving a bit of smoke.' If he had not known so already, Raw would realize now that his motor was losing its oil.

'Yes, sir,' he said cheerfully. 'I don't think she'll last long. I'll climb a bit.'

Beamont followed the other Typhoon up to a thousand feet. At least the pilot was at a sufficient height to bale out if necessary. But Peter Raw's luck was to hold for another year. Crossing the coast he curved straight in to make an immediate landing at base. Somehow, incredibly, he had flown nearly fifty miles with one piston smashed to pieces. Van Lierde's aircraft had been badly shot up, and Beamont's and one other machine had been raked with superficial holes and gashes in wings and cowlings.

On the credit side came confirmation from the Royal Navy at Dover that the Typhoons had sunk two R-type minesweepers, crippled another, and had also severely damaged a motor flakship.

CHAPTER X

FIND THE TEMPESTS

IN the stimulus of action and the proof beyond doubt of the superiority at low altitude over any current fighter, British or German, consciousness of the Typhoon's immaturity faded into the background. The rate of accidents declined as time eradicated the engine faults, but the problem of the aircraft's tail was more complicated. No sooner did the trouble seem remedied by strengthening and stiffening the rear fuselage than unpredictably, mysteriously, another tail broke.

The Typhoon was taking aviation into a sphere of new flight problems which for the following decade were to constitute the prime challenge to aeronautical scientists and designers. It was carrying speed to a region in which air changed from its fluid form, and began to compress into an increasingly solid resistance to motion. Waves of compressed air which would no longer flow smoothly, heaped into a barrier round the aircraft and its controls: into a 'wall of sound', as the French described it when in later years aircraft reached supersonic speed, and the pent-up energy in the compressed air was released in the medium of sound as a shock wave explosion or 'sonic bang.'

Knowledge of the effects of this compressibility of air, and the additional strains and stresses which flight in the sonic region imposed, was then scanty and uncertain. Only in that year, 1943, did the United States with the Lockheed Lightning, and Britain with the Typhoon's predecessor, the Tornado, and the Spitfire, begin research and investigation into compressibility effects. The severe vibration and buffeting from pressure changes in airflow approaching the speed of sound, the liability to twisting and distortion of airframe and control surfaces under violent changes of trim, the characteristics of metal fatigue, had yet to be analysed and assessed.

At least three good theories were advanced to explain the cause of the Typhoon's tail trouble. Any or all of them may have been correct, and any or all of the measures adopted in consequence, may have accounted for the fact that by the end of 1913, such accidents had become very rare, and subsequently ceased altogether. The exact cause and the actual cure were never clearly defined.

By May, 1913, when Beamont completed his second tour of operations and was posted back to Hawker's, this time for experimental test flying duties, research was still proceeding. Ironically Beamont was assigned to the flight investigation of failures about which he had been complaining as a Typhoon squadron commander.

All except one of the tail incidents had occurred in the Service. Philip Lucas and Bill Humble had done their best at Hawker's to reproduce conditions and circumstances of reported accidents, but had not been successful in revealing any flaw for first-hand diagnosis on the spot, although Ken Seth Smith had been killed in unexplained circumstances during development tests in 1942.

Beamont, who had hitherto flown the Typhoon with the fervent hope that the tail was not going to fall off, was now faced with a series of research flights designed to test whether stresses in the tail could reach breaking point within the design speed. The limiting diving speed set on the Typhoon for Service pilots had been 475 m.p.h., a fact much in his mind as he took off to dive the Typhoon to a terminal speed of 500 m.p.h. Not that there was any reason to fear disaster after the easy confidence with which the Typhoon had passed every test leading up to the final stages dive. He had already made high speed tests at low altitude, and in shallow dives had stood on the rudder and cut the engine, to produce sudden changes in yawing and torque, and therefore in the strains and stresses on the airframe.

At 31,000 feet he levelled out. It was intensely cold. Far below, the earth was lost from sight under a layer of low level cloud which spread like a blanket to the horizon. For a moment he felt swallowed in the isolation of the sky, conscious of height and loneliness; and then the fleeting hesitation, the lull in which intent is transferred into action, was gone. Automatically his fingers checked the tightening of the seat harness, felt the reassurance of the parachute's rip-cord, ready at hand. Then the throttle was wide open and he was racing at full power, nose slightly down to gather speed. At close on 400 m.p.h. he half rolled the Typhoon, and with speed building up rapidly, trimmed and straightened the aircraft into a steep dive.

Strain-gauges linked to tail and fuselage kept a continuous record of stress and vibration as the Typhoon, quivering and shuddering, passed the Service limit of 475 m.p.h. The needle of the airspeed indicator slowed and wavered, but still progressed, hesitantly, and vibration increased to a violent pitch.

At 24,000 feet the speed was over 500 m.p.h. The tail still held, although it felt as if at any moment not just the tail but the whole shuddering aircraft must shake to pieces.

He tried to ease out of the dive, but his pull on the stick brought no response. He clenched his teeth. Two hands on the control column, he heaved with all his strength. Still the nose would not come up. The aircraft was caught in a vice, its elevator heavy and ineffective. For a moment he thought of trimming but rejected the idea. The effect on the final recovery could be catastrophic. Again he fought and pulled desperately at the stick, but the aircraft was a quivering unresponsive, weight under his hands. The dive was out of control.

His hand sought the harness release, but his mind stayed it. There was height and time to spare; and always the chance that control would return at lower altitude. If not he would bale out around 10,000 feet.

The violence of the buffeting and shaking numbed all sense of speed as the Typhoon fell through nine thousand feet like an unsprung car hurtling on its wheel rims down a cobbled street. And then, when it seemed that man and machine could endure no longer, the climax passed.

The increase in the velocity of sound at lower altitude had widened the gap between it and the speed of the Typhoon. Compressibility effects diminished, shock waves dispersed, the airflow smoothed out. There was still noise and there was still vibration, but oscillations were dying away. At 14,000 feet the elevator became effective again, and by 9,000 feet Beamont had brought the Typhoon out of the dive into level flight.

Once more the aircraft was flying quietly and responsively.

No Service pilot, thought Beamont as he returned to base with the strain-gauge records of the beating the Typhoon had taken and survived, need have any apprehensions about structural failure through sheer speed after a flight like that.

Already, however, as he worked with Philip Lucas and Bill Humble on the development of the Tempest, he was thinking of the Typhoon as an aircraft of the past. He had waged a long, personal battle to keep the Typhoon operational and results had justified his faith; but now his thoughts were full of the Tempest. which was about to join the conflict as the fastest fighter in the sky. In performance tests Beamont had exceeded the existing world speed record and reached 477 m.p.h. in straight and level flight with the first prototype.

As soon as the first two or three Tempests had passed to the R.A.F. Beamont was restless again, eager to follow the tests to their logical conclusion, and try the Tempest at the other end, in action. He began to haunt 11 Group, putting out feelers and dropping hints with such pertinacity that no one could be left in any doubt of what he wanted.

Finally, in February, 1944, Air Vice-Marshal Saunders invited him to lunch.

'You have been flying the new Tempest at Hawker's,' he said. 'How do you like it?'

'Very much, sir. It's a fine aeroplane. The fastest thing there is I think.'

'Good. How do you feel about forming the first Tempest wing?'

Beamont hesitated in surprise. 'I had been thinking of asking you for a Tempest squadron, sir.'

'Fine. Now you'll have three, although until sufficient numbers are available, you will have to operate with just two squadrons of Tempests, and one of Spitfires. What is the range of the Tempest?'

'About five hundred miles, sir.'

'In that case I shall want you within 170 miles of the Seine.'

Saunders turned thoughtfully to a map on the wall. 'I am sorry there are no permanent aerodromes available, but you can take your pick of Newchurch, Headcorn, Friston, or Dellquay.'

The sites were all advanced air-strips with metal track runways laid over farmland. Dellquay was very near to his home in Chichester, but resisting the temptation, he decided in favour of Newchurch's firm ground, flat approaches, and nearness to the Kent coast, which promised good weather, and to the enemy coast, which promised activity.

Promoted acting Wing Commander at the age of twenty-three Beamont took up his headquarters in a derelict country house at Castle Camps, near Saffron Walden, on March 7. The first Tempest wing was to be formed out of 486 Squadron at Castle Camps, 56 Squadron at Acklington, and 3 Squadron at Bradwell Bay; and at the start one of them, as Saunders had warned him, would have to operate with Spitfires.

To his dismay Beamont found only five Tempests available when he started to equip his first squadron.

'I know there are more,' he protested to Group. 'At least twenty left Langley last month whilst I was there.'

'Well they haven't come to us,' Group said. 'When they do we'll let you have them. Until then you'll have to wait. Sorry, but that's the way it is.'

Beamont replaced the receiver slowly. He had been charged with the task of forming the Tempest wing and bringing it to operational status in the shortest possible time. The idea of sitting behind a trestle table and waiting for things to happen, was preposterous. To make sure that his facts were incontestable he visited Langley again. Philip Lucas confirmed that not twenty, but twenty-eight Tempests had by then been delivered to the R.A.F.

Borrowing a Vega Gull from Hawker's, Beamont set off to find the missing aircraft.

The Chief Engineering Officer at 11 Group remained insistent that there were no more than five Tempests in the Service.

'I have come straight from Langley, and I know that twenty-eight have been delivered,' Beamont asserted. 'They must be somewhere.'

'All right, if there are any, they will be in Maintenance Command.'

'Well, where's the best place to start looking?'

'I should say Kemble or Aston Down maintenance units,' advised the Chief Engineering Officer.

'Thanks,' said Beamont, and flew to Aston Down.

'Who sent you?' the Chief Technical Officer demanded.

'A.O.C. 11 Group,' answered Beamont with a free interpretation of the truth.

The C.T.O. was not impressed. The affairs of the maintenance unit was no concern of 11 Group or Beamont, whose visit was an unwarranted intrusion. He was not prepared to give any help or information, and even refused to say how many Tempests were at the unit.

Refusing to be discouraged, Beamont tried his luck at Kemble, where the C.T.O. was more reasonable. Yes, he said, they had a dozen Tempests, and he believed there were another eight or ten at Aston Down.

'You'll be getting those in a few weeks,' the C.T.O. told him, as they walked round the hangars where some Tempests were apparently standing idle.

'Why not straight away?'

'They're not ready. They have to go through the usual modifications programme and have the guns fitted.'

'But the guns are fitted. They were fitted before they left the factory.'

'Not operationally fitted,' explained the C.T.O. 'They have to be stripped down to bring in some overdue modifications.'

'I never heard of any overdue mods. at Langley,' said Beamont. 'What are they?'

The C.T.O. was non-committal, but he had the final word. 'No matter what you think, the aircraft must be stripped and reassembled, before the Government A.I.D. (Aircraft Inspection Department) certificate can be issued. And we do have other things to do apart from your Tempests. They will have to wait their turn. You can make up your mind that it will be four or five weeks before you start getting any of these.'

Beamont did not think that was good enough, and impetuously he flew to the headquarters of 1 Group, Maintenance Command, at Andover. His position was delicate, he knew. At the maintenance units there was a chance of keeping his visits private and unofficial, although Aston Down had promptly put him right on that point. At headquarters, however, his visit could be nothing but official, and automatically raised the matter to an inter-Command level.

'Who had sent him?' everyone wanted to know. 'Where was his authority?'

An indignant attitude met the discovery that this very young Wing Commander had chosen to ignore the normal channels through which he might properly have made his representations, and was enquiring on his own initiative; but eventually the Wing Commander, Planning, softened to the extent of discussing the position with him.

'After all, Air Vice-Marshal Saunders has instructed me to form a Tempest Wing without delay, and I can't do that if I haven't any Tempests,' said Beamont wearily. 'I did try 11 Group first, but they said there weren't any more Tempests.'

'Afraid they are right. I can assure you not one has come through yet. If we had any, you'd have them like a shot, old boy.'

'But I was at Langley and I know more than twenty-eight have been despatched from the factory.'

'There may be a few at the units, then, but not many.'

Beamont hesitated. He might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb, he decided. 'I have seen them,' he said. 'I have seen them at Kemble, and I am told there are more at Aston Down.'

The Wing Commander was taken aback. 'In that case it seems as though there must be some, although I had no knowledge of them. All right, I'll look into the matter and if there is any way of speeding up delivery, I will do what I can.'

The half-hearted promise did little to cheer Beamont as he returned to Castle Camps with the feeling that his trip had been a failure. He was wrong. Two days later five more Tempests arrived, and within three weeks he had one and a half squadrons in training. By April, he had brought the three squadrons together at Newchurch, Dungeness—3 and 486 with Tempests, and 56 with Typhoons replaced by Spitfire IXs until July when the full equipping of the wing was finally completed.

CHAPTER XI

AIRFIELD ATTACK

No security leak was necessary to realize that the day for the invasion of Europe was approaching. The air was charged with a sense of destiny, a feeling that history was about to be made; and the atmosphere did much to inspire pilots with keenness to reach the highest possible standard with their new aircraft in readiness for the big occasion.

Training formations and combat practices were varied with sweeps over the Continent, but no enemy aircraft appeared as a whetting-stone for their guns. The Luftwaffe had been driven literally to the ground.

Instead, however, the wing found a new enemy growing as the Tempest developed teething troubles, and airscrew failure caused a number of accidents, although fortunately none were fatal.

And then one afternoon late in May, two Polish pilots took off for low-level reconnaissance of the Channel ports and did not return. It was incomprehensible. Both were top-line, experienced pilots, who knew the coast and every flak position well.

'Probably those heavies at Boulogne,' Beamont summed up to Alan Dredge, their squadron commander, but in his mind he was wondering. Surely it was too much of a coincidence for two engines to fail within such a short space of time?

When he flew with the New Zealand Tempest squadron that evening, the doubt was back in his mind and growing. The Continent was peacefully inactive. Not a shot was fired, not once did they see any flak.

Next day, as if to remove doubt, three Tempests came down with engine failure. One pilot baled out safely near Canterbury, and the other two were injured in crash landings.

Beamont felt sick when he heard the news. Don't let it be the days of the Typhoon all over again, he prayed. Nothing could more destroy a pilot's morale than a growth of feeling that his aircraft was unreliable. Pilots, who accepted with a will the threat of flak and enemy fighters, were inclined to look askance at the additional, and seemingly unnecessary, risk of engine failure over sea or enemy soil, or on take off and landing.

The fact that Beamont knew in this instance where the fault lay, and knew too that it was being remedied, did not help matters for the present. Since the previous December when the first airscrew on a Tempest had oversped during tests in the hands of Peter Raw, Philip Lucas and the Hawker team had been working on the trouble. Finally they had succeeded in persuading the airscrew company to modify their piston seals, but it had taken time—far too much time.

It was always the same, this endless shifting of responsibility which too often led to inexcusable delays in discovering and remedying defects as they appeared. The trouble lay in the fact that an aircraft was built in three main components: the airframe, the engine, and the airscrew. Although airframe manufacturers built the machine as a whole, responsibility for the functioning of engine and airscrew remained with the individual manufacturers. Consequently if a defect occurred in engine or airscrew, the tendency was for the manufacturers to blame the installation. Each new problem could lead to weeks of separate investigation by different firms, all anxious to prove that the fault lay not with them, until at last the Ministry concerned stepped in to co-ordinate the investigation and apportion the responsibility.

Months before at Hawker's, Beamont had seen the cause of the Tempest's engine failure diagnosed as an over-speeding of the propeller, leading in a space of seconds to an uncontrollable increase in engine revolutions to two or three thousand per minute more than its maximum. Thereupon the bearings failed, the oil system collapsed, and the engine cut.

The airscrew manufacturers refused at first to accept this analysis. They took the view that it was the engine bearings which had failed, causing a breakdown in oil pressure, with the result that the propeller naturally over-sped out of control. It was therefore not until June, six months after the first failure, that the Tempest wing began to receive modified propellers which solved the problem. Meanwhile this high risk of engine failure was added to the pilot's normal operational hazard.

Recurring crashes, however, did give Beamont a heartless opportunity of discovering and sorting out the quality of his pilots. Lack of enthusiasm for flying, heated arguments with flight commanders about off-duty time, early returns with aircraft suffering from fictitious troubles—such symptoms enabled him to have the weaker element posted and replaced with new pilots whilst there was still time to train them.

Lack of combat action did not help the situation. Almost daily the wing was sweeping over France and the Low Countries, and often seeing tempting train targets which they had to leave untouched. Since December, 1943, Command had banned attacks on Continental railways for diplomatic reasons.

Occasionally pilots had been able to circumvent this order by submitting carefully worded Intelligence reports. Twice earlier in the month Beamont had deliberately flown low over trains near Boulogne, and near Rouen, to provoke streams of tracer shells from the flak wagons so that he could lawfully retaliate.

Van Lierde, too, had reported to Intelligence that he had been attacked 'by a hostile train whilst flying peacefully along at a thousand feet' thus forcing him to destroy it.

A few days later he had improved on this. He was leading a section of four aircraft on a patrol of the German airfields at Melsbrook, and Le Culot, when he sighted near Brussels along train of flat wagons heading north-east. Closer inspection showed that they were carrying between forty and fifty camouflaged staff cars. The cars were indisputably a legitimate target.

The fact that there happened to be a train underneath the automobiles was in the words of Van Lierde's report on return, merely 'unfortunate.' The target was accordingly strafed until his section had used all their ammunition and the train was in flames. Combat films supported their claims that at least forty vehicles had been destroyed; and later Beamont was to hear further confirmation in unexpected circumstances. In Stalag Luft III he met a Flight Lieutenant, Geoffrey Rice, who had passed by the wrecked train on his way to Germany as a prisoner-of-war, and had counted fifty-two Renault Saloons, either burnt or burning.

But these were isolated instances, and it was not until the night of May 21 that the news for which they had been waiting, the chance of action that would clear the mind of all psychological problems, arrived.

Beamont was roused in his tent at 3 a.m. by the duty intelligence officer.

'Big show tomorrow, sir,' he reported. 'They've lifted the train ban.'

A few minutes later a dispatch rider thrust his way under the tent flap: 'Wing Commander, Flying, sir? Form D for you, sir.'

Beamont's eyes skimmed through the preamble, addressed to every wing in all three groups, as well as American fighter groups, and came quickly to the paragraph:

'Intention: To attack and destroy with all available squadrons enemy rail transport from Germany to the Atlantic coast from first light May 21. Planning routes and timing in allotted areas at wing leaders' discretion. . . .'

He whistled. A completely free hand in an area of which they knew every yard.

With a map of northern France and Belgium on the floor by the bed, he studied the orders for some minutes, and telephoned his programme to the intelligence officer: 'Area divided into four sectors, Ostend—Brussels, Brussels-Mons, Mons-Valenciennes and Valenciennes-Douai. Each sector to be patrolled by four aircraft at a time. First sortie, No. 3 Squadron, four sections at 0800 hours. Second sortie, 486 Squadron, at 0900 hours, and so on at hourly intervals until midday. Submit that to Ops. Briefing at 7.30. Have the squadron commanders warned now. I'll lead a section of 3 Squadron. Thanks, good night.'

He turned into his bed half expecting the telephone to ring again. Operations would probably want to know why they were not sweeping in squadron formation but the Intelligence Officer could probably take care of that. He was familiar enough with Beamont's idea of maximum destruction at minimum loss. Well-led, small formations covering the whole area, Beamont was convinced, would produce better results and present less vulnerable targets than one large one.

When the telephone did awaken him, however, it was dawn.

Dawn with a chill in the air, forgotten at once in the exciting throbbing of fifty or more engines running up their 2,000 horsepower.

His surmise was correct. Group wanted to know why they were not flying in squadron formations.

'How have the first shows gone?' he countered.

'Plenty of trains, but losing some Spits,' replied the Controller.

'Naturally,' said Beamont. 'A big formation with all the light flak the Hun has in the coastal belt is asking for it. I think you will find our system satisfactory.'

In the marquee he briefed the pilots with the main points of the tactics. 'Two thousand fighters are on this show, which is intended to paralyse the enemy's transport system,' he finished, 'and I see no reason why we should not top the list of scores. Don't forget to watch for flak wagons. They are usually on the last truck. If you do find one firing at you, leave the engine to the bloke behind and concentrate on knocking out the gun.'

For once he was happy and free of the usual qualms during the last few minutes of waiting to take off. Train-busting was an occupation he enjoyed, and the knowledge that he was doing this operation in his way entirely added to the pleasurable feeling of anticipation.

Cloud base was low, but visibility unlimited. Crossing the Calais coastal defence belt at 4,000 feet, they came down inland out of cloud and ranged over the Lille-Mons area. Concentrations of flak from trains and from nearby towns coned towards them, tightening the excitement of the low-level sweep. Aircraft quivered under the recoil of their cannon. Mushroom clouds of dirt and dust ploughed into the air from bursts falling short; and then as the aim righted glints and flashes of shell-bursts spattered the engine, to bring sometimes a quick end in the explosion of a bursting boiler, sometimes a pyre of smoke and flame.

Beamont's cine-camera gun film made his own claims for him. A train blown up at Lens. Another at Orchies in clouds of steam. A single locomotive, near La Bouverie, in the instant of explosion. A goods train with diesel engine in flames. Pilot's time on single-engine aircraft, records his log book: 'Day, 45 minutes. Ops.'

His plan for sweeps in small sections instead of squadron concentrations was amply justified. That particular section of four aircraft returned to base with a total of seven trains put out of action: and in the two days of the operation designed to put enemy transport at a standstill in readiness for the invasion, the Tempest wing attacked nearly one hundred trains, by far the highest wing score of all Commands. In contrast to the high casualty rate recorded by some Spitfire wings, the Tempests suffered no loss at all. As a result, Beamont was requested by Fighter Command to supply a special report on the 'train-busting' tactics that he had employed.

The following week the new Tempest wing was given a chance of proving itself against a sterner target. On a reconnaissance sweep on the morning of May 28 Johnny Johnson's Spitfire wing spotted a group of German bombers on Cormeilles airfield, north of Paris. The zone was heavily defended, and the Met. forecast showed no promise of cloud cover. It was entirely up to him, Group told Beamont. If he felt the Tempests could succeed in making an effective attack without serious losses, he could go.

He studied the relevant maps and a target photograph on which the probable positions of the enemy aircraft had been marked; and summoned 3 Squadron for an immediate briefing.

'There will certainly be flak,' he warned the pilots, 'but we shall attack only if conditions and the approach are absolutely right for a surprise run out of the sun. We shall cross the enemy coast at Le Tréport at 10,000 feet, and fly straight to the target at 300 m.p.h., arriving on the north-west side at 7,000 feet. The sun will be due west.

'I hope to see the aircraft in time to peel off and dive straight from the sun across the south corner of the aerodrome at about 400 m.p.h. You will get good warning to string out in echelon before going down.

'We will keep low on the deck, out of the way of any flak, until we are clear of target area, and then climb and reform over these woods. Any questions?

'O.K. then. We attack only if conditions are suitable. Cockpits at 16.45, start-up 16.50, take-off 1700 hours. Check your watches.'

He walked out to his aircraft which bore his own initials, 'R.B.' the privilege of the wing leader. Giving the maps, course card, and helmet to the waiting crew he swung on to the wing and lowered himself into the cockpit.

The sun beat down uncomfortably, and by the time he had buckled on parachute and seat harness and stowed his maps, he was sticky with sweat. He set the cockpit chronometer. Two minutes to take off.

He gave a couple of preliminary priming strokes, pressed the starting buttons, and taxied over the grass strip to the main runway. One by one the aircraft swung into line behind, his 'number two' in position close on his right.

He shut the cockpit hood, dropped his hand in signal, and opened the throttle. Once airborne, he kept his speed down to enable the others to close in, and turned slowly on to course.

With the rest of the squadron drawing up into formation he crossed over Dungeness. Conditions were as perfect for the attack as they would ever be. Above, a cloudless sky; below, a ground haze, rising to 7,000 feet, which kept visibility to less than five miles.

Levelling out at 8,000 feet the Tempests headed south. They had been flying only a few minutes, however, when Alan Dredge reported engine trouble. Breaking away from the formation, he headed for home with his number two. Soon afterwards 'Lefty' Witman also had to return.

Only six aircraft left. Could the job be done with so few, Beamont wondered anxiously. But it was the first real chance to prove the Tempests, and in all probability the enemy bombers would operate over England that night, and be gone from Cormeilles by the morrow. He was loath to return.

Rearranging the formation into a vee of three pairs, he increased speed to a steady 300 m.p.h. A thin white line in the mist developed into the low cliffs of Le Tréport. The estuary of the Somme stretched out to port. Gently weaving away from the flak at St. Valery, they crossed the coast. The target was only eight miles away. Everything depended on accurate navigation. He pinpointed the landmarks: the railway passing through Aumale; the runways of Poix airfield to port.

They were getting deep into France. How still and peaceful the country looked under the soft dreamy haze, how removed from the awareness of war. Soon there should be a big wood ahead.

Three miles from the target, but where the hell's that wood? His nerves were straining again, provoking him into unreasonable anxiety that something might go wrong. Ah, there was the wood. That was better.

Two minutes to go, and the weather perfect. He knew now that the attack would take place. There was no reason why it should not. No reason except perhaps that he was left with six instead of nine aircraft; and Group had not ordered the attack, they had left it to his discretion.

But there was no time for brooding. On the starboard the silver snake of the Seine was sweeping west, and taking shape ahead was the town of Cormeilles, and the white strips of runways signposting the aerodrome beyond. He picked out the details against his mental picture of the target photograph. The runways ran south to north, and south-east to north-west, with hangars on the northern boundary. Yes, there they were, a series of concrete dispersal tracks off the western side of the field; and another long dispersal stretching away to the south. Then four, five, more black shapes of twin-engined aircraft stood out sharply against the dead-white concrete bays in the south dispersal.

'Hello Kelvin aircraft, target ahead. Kelvin leader attacking in southern bays. Going down to port in thirty seconds. Line astern for attack. Go!'

The other aircraft slid over behind him as he throttled back and turned slightly starboard in order to keep the aerodrome in sight on his port.

No flak so far. When would it start? The sun was at his right shoulder now, and the enemy bombers like squat black insects below, were level with his left.

'O.K. boys, Kelvin leader going down to port. Make this good now. Here we go!'

He heeled over, steeper and steeper, until the horizon was lost and the white blur of the aerodrome concrete was sliding across the top of the windscreen. Slowly he brought the nose up until the target area came into view, directly ahead: a long white road and a square concrete pen with an aircraft in it, and the rest of the aerodrome beyond.

He glanced over his shoulder into sun. The formation was peeling off, one after the other, into line astern. The needle of the airspeed indicator pushed steadily forward: 350 . . . 380 . . . 400 . . . 420 miles an hour, and the Tempest shrieked and screamed as if it were justifying its name. The ground was one moment distant, the next, rushing towards him into close-up.

Gunsight on. Camera on. Correct with the rudder, lining up the sights until the aircraft, a Ju.188, is steadied in the centre. Now fire! Nobody could possibly miss. A sitting bird at point-blank range. But that does not diminish the exuberant thrill as shell bursts flicker the length of the target. A wing collapses, a large fragment flies off the top of the fuselage. Dust and smoke fill the pen.

Vaguely he is aware that the aerodrome defence has opened up, but to hell with the flak! Concentrating still on the target with the sights held down aiming into the centre of the cloud of debris, his mind ignores the threat until he has pulled up across the wall of the pen, through the smoke from the burning Ju.188, and is over the aerodrome at twenty feet.

Now there is no denying the danger. A black puff above the hood. A cluster of grapes behind. A jar under the port wing. Another. Another. Safety is speed, and never has speed such concentrated haste and urgency.

Throttle wide open, he urges the last ounce of energy out of the Tempest. Now is the time to prove it is the fastest fighter flying. Now with the ground running into a four hundred miles an hour streak, and the last few seconds to go, before the northern boundary promises sanctuary.

He is past it and away, away from the whiplash cracks and jolting blasts of shell-fire, but he still keeps low over the fields beyond as he turns to look back at the scene. And what a scene! It is hard to credit that the airfield is not being bombed. Can half a dozen Tempests alone cause such confusion?

Everyone of the aerodrome's guns is letting fly, and the barrage of shell bursts mingles with the mushrooming smoke of two burning bombers, and the dust and debris ploughed into the air by the cannon of the attacking aircraft. Through it all, obscured for moments at a time, flash one after another the Tempests, running the gauntlet to the temporary refuge beyond the northern boundary.

The first two, Beamont notes with the professional eye of a grass-cutting enthusiast, are lower than even he had been, as they crouch to get under the black grapes of destruction. If they lowered their wheels they would bounce.

But the first two have made it, and in their wake come the others with the last Tempest already half way across the aerodrome.

He switches on the r/t. 'Well done Kelvin aircraft. Kelvin leader climbing to Angels seven. Re-form. Anyone who is hit speak up.'

Surprisingly there was no answer. Surprisingly all six had passed unscathed through that concentration of light flak. Beamont counted to make sure. Three were already formating on him as they climbed, and another was rapidly drawing into position. That left one. He scanned the air below. Good, there it was, still some distance but flying without sign of distress.

He waited until the straggler had caught up a bit, and then called the squadron again. 'Keep your eyes open, chaps. There may be a fighter around, opening up a bit.'

He looked around with satisfaction. Everyone was back in formation and the squadron was flying as beautifully as when it had left Dungeness. The weather was still fine, and success had whetted the appetite. They still had some ammunition left.

Hopefully he called Operations. 'Hello, Kingsley. This is Kelvin leader. Any information for me?'

'Hello Kelvin leader. This is Kingsley. Sorry no activity for you. Have you had any joy?'

'Yes, a good prang. Listening out.'

A pity he thought regretfully. Another day gone, another sortie flown, and still the chance to win its spurs as a fighter in air to air combat eluded the Tempest.

Sand dunes ran into the sea and he throttled back. Landfall in fifteen minutes. As always when he was over the sea, his ear began to concentrate on the note of the engine. Surely it was running a bit rough? But the revolutions were steady. Oil temperature, pressure, radiator temperature, boost pressure—they were all correct. Curious how he had never grown out of imagining trouble over the sea. Perhaps it was a legacy of the Typhoons.

In a tight circuit with the others stringing out behind, he turned into land at Newchurch. His watch said a quarter-past six. In little more than an hour they had flown three hundred miles to the outskirts of Paris and back, and had destroyed two and damaged two more of the bombers which had arrived at Cormeilles as part of the force that was to attack Bristol that night.

CHAPTER XII

D DAY

Beamont's first intimation that the invasion was definitely at hand came on June 4, 1914, when he was flying back from Hawkinge with prints from the camera gun film of the attack on the Ju.188s at Cormeilles. A flight of Fleet Air Arm torpedo-bombers flashed by, their appearance curiously unfamiliar. It was some seconds before he grasped the significance: they were painted with broad black and white stripes, the secret marking for the invasion. Excitedly he put the Tempest into a dive for Newchurch.

The intelligence officer met him on landing. 'Ops have been calling you, sir,' he reported.

'O.K., Spy, I'll ring them.' He shut the door of his office and telephoned Operations. He was not disappointed.

'Operation Overlord in effect 1200 hours tomorrow,' he was told on the scrambler. 'Aircraft to be repainted by midday. Report Tangmere 1000 hours tomorrow for A.O.C's briefing. Absolute secrecy to be maintained.'

He replaced the receiver and, suppressing the eager impulse to burst into the crew room and shout the news aloud, went to see about the painting of the aircraft. But that in itself was enough to set the whole camp talking.

At five o'clock when the painting was well under way, Group called for a fighter sweep of two squadrons.

Beamont choked a sigh of exasperation. Really, it was no more than to be expected. 'Roger,' he agreed politely, and added: 'Shall I have each aircraft equipped with a bosun's chair to enable the crews to continue painting during the sweep?"

Minutes later Group telephoned again. The fighter sweep was cancelled, though the request had not been so foolish as it seemed. Complete inactivity would have led to speculation by the enemy.

He found the two squadron commanders in the mess tent.

'Things are warming up,' Beamont admitted, 'but I can't say any more. One thing, we shan't be flying tomorrow, so see you have maximum serviceability by tomorrow night. Meanwhile all personnel are confined to camp.'

The night was clear and full of stars making the most of the interlude between the dying tinge of sunset in the west and the pale glow heralding the moonrise in the east. A soft breeze gently rustled the trees behind the tents. An owl screeched, drawing attention to the stillness which followed.

Beamont rolled up the flaps of his tent and lay down on the camp bed, letting his thoughts dwell for a moment on the strength of the wing. Was everything as well organized as it could be? Were there any signs of weakness?

He had frequently discussed indications of nerve strain with Morell, the medical officer, and had ruthlessly weeded out anyone who showed the slightest sign of cracking. The result was that he had as good a bunch of pilots as any commander could wish for: young pilots, too, with an average age of twenty-one and plenty of stamina to stand up to what might be the hardest air fighting since the Battle of Britain.

No, he had no doubts of them, but could he rely implicitly upon himself? Why on this third tour of operations should he be suddenly assailed by spasms of nerves before take-off? A certain queasiness in the stomach was natural, but he had never been so conscious of these fears on his previous tours. Were they born of the additional responsibility as a wing commander?

He would still back himself gladly to outfly any man in the wing, or for that matter, any enemy pilot in the sky. The pity was that he had not seen an air combat for two years. Plenty of ground-strafing attacks, but not a flicker of an enemy aircraft in his sights. Perhaps that was the trouble.

He was sure now that it was. An air combat, another victory would be the natural cure for these moments of doubt. Feeling more cheerful, his mind settled on a prospective dog-fight, he fell asleep.

Next morning he flew his Tempest, 'R.B.', shining in its new black and white stripes, to Tangmere. Parked outside the Watch Office were Spitfire IXs, XIIs, and XIVs, Typhoons with bomb-racks and rocket projectile rails, and Mustangs, all bearing the initials of their owners. Top-scoring pilot Johnny Johnson, Peter Simpson, Don Kingaby, Hawkeye Wells, Jamie Jamieson, Scotty Scott, Johnny Baldwin, Jamie Rankin, Johnny Walker, Sailor Malan, Robin Johnston, and Charles Green were but a few of them, wing leaders and sector commanders, veterans of the Battles of France and Britain. Not a man had less than three decorations. Many wore four, five, even six, all won in combat with the enemy.

In Air Force jargon, the hangar doors were wide open. Enthusiastically the company discussed the merits of different aircraft, wagered that theirs would be the first wing to land on the Continent, and speculated on the likely opposition of the Luftwaffe.

The animated buzz of conversation hushed suddenly as the Air Officer Commanding, Air Vice-Marshal Saunders, entered the Operations room. He waited whilst a sheaf of maps was unrolled and pinned to the blackboards. This was IT, right enough. Red, blue, yellow, and black lines stretched across the maps from London, Dungeness, Portsmouth, Southampton, and the West Country, to a point south of the Isle of Wight, and then on across the Channel to Normandy.

There was no need to command attention. Every man waited upon the A.O.C. in eager anticipation.

'Gentlemen,' he said. 'Tomorrow is D Day. I will outline briefly the plan as it concerns us, and then I wish you to return to your units to open and study your sealed orders for Operation "Overlord". You will brief your wings at dusk and be instantly available from midnight onwards.

'The armies have already been safely embarked, and are at this moment moving out for the concentration point off the Isle of Wight. By midnight they will be forming up a few miles off shore for the landing between Caen and Bayeux. From midnight onwards airborne landings, culminating in the landing of a large glider force at 0400 hours will take place throughout the area in preparation for the main assault.

'For our part the Tactical Air Force will supply close support to the army on a scale which will keep every one of their aircraft constantly in the air. In addition the R.A.F. and U.S.A.F. will maintain a continuous patrol of two hundred fighters over the beaches from thirty minutes before sunrise until thirty minutes after sunset. With the force available this means four patrols a day for each squadron. It is a heavy responsibility, and the first four days will be extremely hard work, but after that we can expect to revert to a less rigorous programme.

'The enemy is not expected to react in the air in great numbers on the first day, but may appear in force up to two or three hundred strong in three or four days. That will be your opportunity.

'Finally, gentlemen,' concluded the A.O.C., 'I need hardly remind you that the Royal Air Force has never failed in a mission. Many of you took part, years ago, in incredible victories against tremendous odds: victories which set a standard that has been maintained ever since. You are now on the brink of the greatest adventure of all, and I have no doubt as to the outcome of your part in it. I sincerely wish you Good Luck, Godspeed, and Good Hunting.'

The briefing broke up quickly, and with farewells of 'See you at Le Touquet,' the wing leaders took off for their units.

There was no time for lunch. It took Beamont two hours to read the 'Overlord' file of Invasion orders. No detail had been overlooked. Coloured plans and charts showed convoy routes, landing sites, and the immediate battle areas; the dispositions of the various formations, the area of naval action, anti-aircraft zones. Fighter patrol areas were subdivided into convoy protection, beach cover, armed reconnaissance, and the position of fighter control ships and Air Sea Rescue services. Page after page of rosters not only assigned both R.A.F. and American squadrons to their various roles, but listed actual times of take-off throughout the day.

Beamont sat back feeling rather heady. The whole plan was a masterpiece of organization that took one's breath away. If only it works, he added in mental qualification.

His own wing he noticed with disappointment had come out of it rather badly. 56 Squadron, which was still awaiting Tempests and making do with Spitfires, was down for close escort to the airborne forces at dawn, but both the Tempest squadrons were in reserve at 'Readiness' with no duties allotted them.

Evidently somewhere, he supposed, the prejudice against the Tempest, the feeling that it was still an untried, doubtful quantity, still existed. Tempests had had their teething troubles, true, but what else could be expected when an aircraft was pressed into service so early in its development. If only he could take some of these doubting Thomases for a ride and show them how the Tempest could fly. Five minutes would be sufficient. A five minutes' flight would convince anyone that Spitfires and Mustangs were not in the same class; and yet they had called in preference upon his reserve squadron of Spitfires!

With his squadron commanders, Wigglesworth, Iremonger, and Hall, he worked out the details concerning the separate squadrons, briefed the whole wing, and began his tour of final inspection of each squadron's aircraft.

Arrangements had been made for refuelling twenty-thousand gallons of petrol a day, if necessary, and already the armoury, standing by on a twenty-four hours' service, was prepared to cope with a complete re-arming of the three squadrons within twenty minutes. Service of all pilot's meals at dispersal had been arranged, and an early breakfast laid on for 3.15 in the morning. Not one thing required his attention.

Satisfied, he returned to his tent, took off his jacket, and and rolled into bed. There was no point in undressing, with less than four hours' sleep ahead and the prospect of being called out urgently at any time. For a moment he listened to the night sounds of the marshes, but he was no longer anxious as he had been the night before. The critical moment had come and the organization had operated perfectly. There remained only the fighting; and there was time enough for that on the morrow.

He fell quickly asleep, but it seemed that he had hardly slept at all when the telephone was waking him with the news that it was 2.45 a.m. The night was dark and cloudy, and mist lay heavy upon the windscreen as he drove hazardously to the rose-covered cottage that housed 3 Squadron offices. The crew room was a confusion of pilots in Mae Wests and flying boots, crowded around the primus stove on which a large pan of eggs was cooking. There was ten minutes to go before 'Readiness', and he decided to take another look at his own aircraft, 'R.B.'

In a dozen places the darkness was stabbed by blue lights dancing backwards and forwards in the roaring exhausts, as some fifty aircraft engines were warmed up, setting the air alive with a harsh resonance. An orange glow momentarily lit one corner of the field with sheets of flame leaping back from a newly started motor.

The setting was familiar enough, little different from any other morning on an active fighter station at readiness; yet the significance of the new dawn gave it fresh colour. He studied the scene with fresh interest.

The ground crews had done their work well on time. One after another the engines, run up and warmed, spluttered into silence, and he returned to the crew room for breakfast.

There was little appetite in the air. Some pilots toyed with their food, and others would not eat at all, complaining that it it was too asterisk early.

'Too ruddy true!' agreed Beamont wholeheartedly. 'Who the hell could eat at this ungodly hour! Give me your egg if you don't want it!' He was thankful that his own nerves had not twisted his stomach into a hard knot that rejected all thought of food.

Time dragged heavily with inactivity. Operations had little news. A dawn weather reconnaissance between Dieppe and Le Havre was ordered for 56 Squadron: that was all. The Spitfires had barely taken off when Biggin Hill were on the phone again with another call for 56 Squadron to escort a glider train at 0530 hours. But for the Tempests there was nothing in sight, except standing by. Standing by, impatiently, whilst the air filled with the distant drone of the American Thunderbolt groups from Ashford and Headcorn, and occasional bunches of red and white lights amongst the scattered cloud marked their path to the assault area.

Beamont drove to 56 Squadron dispersal to meet Hall as he landed at half-past four from his recce. 'Weather's not so hot,' Hall reported. 'We had to fly on instruments most of the way out and back again. But the shipping in the Channel, sir! It has to be seen to be believed.'

Beamont passed him the orders for the glider escort duty, and watched him lead the Spitfires off again as the first rays of sunlight edged the eastern clouds with gold. Forming them up rapidly over the airfield, Hall climbed away to his rendezvous at Bognor. Beamont saw them go in admiration tinged for a moment with envy as he wished that he was with them, and felt that he ought to be. But then the Tempests were his baby; and he could not do efficiently two different types of operational flying at one time.

He moved on to 486, the New Zealand Tempest squadron, whose pilots were sitting outside their tents around a bright log fire. They greeted him with one word: 'When?'

'I can't say exactly, but you'll be flying before long, don't you worry.' Beamont assured them.

When? It was a question he was wondering himself. The wing had been at readiness since 3.15 a.m. and still not a word about the Tempests.

At eight o'clock the Spitfires returned. 'Nothing much doing, sir,' Hall reported. 'Streams of Stirlings and Albemarles towing gliders as far as you can see. They were going in round the canal at Caen. Masses of them on the ground and only a little isolated light flak. We saw two aircraft shot down by flak. No fighters reported at all. The shipping's taking a shelling. One cruiser went up with a terrific explosion. It was an amazing sight.'

He would not have begrudged Hall any successes, but it was becoming something of a point of honour with him that the first victim of his Tempest wing should fall to a Tempest, and not one of his makeshift Spitfires. Jealous for his brood, Beamont could imagine the ribbing the Tempest pilots would take if the chance were offered of saying that they relied on Spitfires to shoot down the enemy for them.

Lounging in a deck chair in the fitful sunshine, he saw the morning drag tediously past. The newspapers arrived but they carried no mention of the invasion, and it seemed as though the invasion too was passing him by. He was tired and disappointed.

It was late afternoon before Operations admitted the existence of the Tempests and called for a convoy escort at squadron strength. Later at dusk they were ordered to Le Havre, but the murk and mist and darkness made it impossible to find the enemy aircraft that were reported to be bombing the beaches. They had to wait until a morning sweep of the same area on D plus 2 for the first encounter with the Luftwaffe.

They crossed the coast that day at Dieppe with Beamont leading 3 Squadron and 486 on his right.

'Bogeys in the vicinity of Lisieux,' Control reported. 'Will you get there as soon as possible.'

'O.K. Kingsley,' Beamont answered. 'Kelvin leader opening up a little and turning right ten degrees.'

The winding Seine was below them. Three minutes at 330 m.p.h. would see them at Lisieux. Beamont's neck chafed on his collar as he scanned the sky, to port, to starboard, above, below. And then he saw them, black specks against the cloud, two miles away and six thousand feet beneath them.

'Hello Kelvin aircraft,' he called quickly. 'There are four or five aircraft at seven o'clock ahead. Watch them.'

He turned the formation gently to port. The distance closed, and the specks grew into five fighters weaving in line astern on a course roughly parallel to that of the Tempests.

Beamont scowled at them in concentration. What on earth were they? Surely they would not be Huns as close to the coast as this. They had not reached Rouen yet. Definitely not Spitfires, Thunderbolts or Typhoons.

The Tempests were overtaking them rapidly. Beamont spoke again into the radio telephone.

'Kelvin leader diving down to investigate aircraft ahead below. Be very careful. I think that they are Mustangs.'

The speed crept up as they lost height at cruising throttle: 350 . . 370 . . . 390 miles an hour. The formation ahead was less than a mile away now. Their weaving was suspicious, but still he could not bring himself to believe that the aircraft were German.

Then, one after another, they changed course in a gentle diving turn to port, and round into view came long, thin, fuselages, and narrow, tapered wings with rounded tips.

'God!' he exclaimed, and snapped on his r/t. 'Kelvin leader. They are not Mustangs, they're 109s. Fairway leader stay up and cover me. Spider squadron attack with me. Come on down and make this good!'

Why did he have to say that, he wondered at once. They needed no exhortation. They would make it good anyway.

Already he was rolling over into a steep dive to cut off the Messerschmitts which were sliding directly below the Tempests on the port side. He glanced quickly over his shoulder for the reassuring, companionable sight of the rest of 3 Squadron slanting down the sky with him. The sun was right behind. It was a perfect 'bounce'.

Or could it be that they were diving headlong into a trap? He dismissed the qualm as soon as it occurred. If there were more Huns above them, Johnny would take care of those, and the Tempests anyway were fast enough to deal with those five 109s, and then think about any others.

Range down to about eight hundred yards, and still overtaking in the dive. No need for more throttle. Just a few seconds longer. He flicked on the gunsight and camera gun switch.

Black crosses were growing plainly visible on the target. How long can this last, he wondered, with excitement mounting to a pitch within him. How unsuspecting can they be!

He selected his target, his lips tightening in tense determination. He had to get this Hun. No, he corrected the personal desire, they all had to get these Huns.

Another glance over his shoulder. The boys are still with him.

Ahead again. The 109s are within range. His thumb strokes the firing button, but still he holds his fire, anxious to get as close as possible.

Now! The Messerschmitts have spotted them at last. Black smoke spurts from their exhaust as they ram open wide their throttles, and reverse violently across the path of the Tempests in a scurry for the cloud tops. But it is too late. The Tempests roll easily down behind them, and Beamont rudders his gunsight on to the last aircraft in the formation.

Bead slightly above the cockpit. Half way along the wing for fifteen degree angle deflection. Now! His thumb tightens and the Tempest shudders with the recoil of the cannon. Hell! He'll never forgive himself. He has missed, and the Luftwaffe pilot is making the most of his chance to alter the situation. Diving at full throttle for the cover of the cloud three thousand feet below, he rolls half over to port with streamers of white vortices from the wing tips, and thick black smoke from the exhaust.

For a moment it looks as if he may succeed, but in desperately trying to shake off the Tempest, the Luftwaffe pilot rolls violently back to starboard, and the change of turn is a fatal mistake. Quickly Beamont swings the Tempest over until the 109 is back in his gunsight at point-blank range. Throttling back sharply to avoid overtaking, he fires with his sight bead on the enemy's cockpit hood.

This time there is no mistake. The range is less than two hundred yards and closing rapidly with the Tempest clocking four hundred miles an hour in spite of the closed throttle. Dusty puffs of shell bursts rise from the 109's tail, fuselage and cockpit, and the sight of them strokes a concentrated desire, an overriding compulsion to destroy. The climax of the hunt is hot in his blood. There is no thought or concern for anything else. Whether they are diving, climbing, turning, Beamont knows not and cares less. His world is a gunsight and a sleek, black fighter, twisting desperately, but growing always bigger and bigger, filling his windscreen.

The turbulence of the 109's slipstream catches him, but he fights it down ruddering hard back on to the target, thumb jammed on the firing button, pumping out shells until a sixth sense of self-preservation warns him he can leave it no longer.

Urgently he pulls back on the stick. The size of the 109 is frightening now, whirling and blurring out of focus as the Tempest rises up over it. The tail flashes by over his port wing. For a moment he is sure they have touched, but it is the full impact of the slipstream that has caused that violent jar and sent him skidding away to safety. Not until then, with the danger of collision past, does the fact register that the fogging of the 109's lines is not due to the spin and blurring of his own vision, but is caused by smoke.

The 109 is on fire! Tensely he rolls the Tempest half over to port. Below, not a hundred yards away, is the 109, still on the same heading, but with yellow flames streaming from the cockpit to the tail. For a few seconds he watches, fascinated. Slowly the port wing crumples and folds back, and the 109 drops vertically, trailing thick, oily smoke, jet black against the whiteness of the cloud.

But the joy of victory, the triumphant exaltation that he had not known for two years, was short-lived. His thoughts had barely turned to the quest of another target when he was hit himself. The Tempest shuddered violently and the cockpit was suddenly full of dust which stung his eyes. His skin prickling in anticipation of another shell-burst, he pulled back hard on the stick and aimed the Tempest at the dazzling ball of sun in a rolling rocket climb.

With relief he felt the aircraft respond normally. 'Come on!' he urged. 'This is where your speed can show them your heels.'

For two, three thousand feet the aircraft climbed vertically towards the sun and no second attack came. He began to breathe more freely. Speed dropped to stalling point and he rolled out of the climb into level flight, urgently scanning the sky. There was no sign of the enemy and no sign of his Number Two. A black smudge of smoke rose from a white cloud but the sky was empty of all other aircraft, friend and foe. Rapidly he took stock of the situation. There was a large hole in the starboard wing where the shell had burst, and the shuddering vibration and reduced performance suggested that the starboard undercarriage had been blown out. He was in no position to run foul of any enemy fighters. The sooner he was back at base, the better. He switched on his r/t. 'Hello Fairway leader. Kelvin leader here. Are you receiving?'

'Fairway leader.'—There was Johnny Iremonger's voice. 'O.K., sir. Am approaching Rouen.'

Now Alan Dredge. 'Hello Spider leader,' he called. 'This is Kelvin leader. Re-form your squadron when you are disengaged and join Fairway west of Rouen. Angels ten. I have been hit and am returning to base. O.K.?'

'Spider leader. Roger, sir. Is your number two with you?'

'Kelvin leader here. No. We've got separated, but I think I'll be O.K.'

Again Beamont spoke into his microphone calling his number two: 'Hello Spider Blue two. Did you see my flamer?'

'Hello Kelvin leader. Yes, I saw it disintegrate. I got one myself, too. The bastard who was pooping at you. I gave him one squirt and he blew up.'

That was the signal. The radio crackled with excited claims and reports. Beamont listened long enough to learn that four of the 109s had gone down in flames, and the fifth was damaged, a probable, and then cut the chatter short.

'Kelvin leader calling all Kelvin aircraft. Shut up! Fairway leader, when you are set, take over lead and continue as planned.'

'O.K. Kelvin leader, listening out.'

Satisfied that he had left everything under control Beamont turned for home. Through a hole in the cloud a glimpse of Rouen reminded him that he had some miles of hostile sky to cover before reaching the coast.

Weaving and skidding he lost height quickly to 7,000 feet and thankfully gained the cover of the wisps of cloud tops. The engine was running smoothly although airspeed was down by fifty miles an hour, and the whole aeroplane was vibrating badly. He had little doubt that a wheel and fairing must be hanging down. Still, he consoled himself, provided the fuel tanks were not hit, he should be able to make base.

The r/t crackled. 'Hello Kelvin leader. Spider Yellow four here. My motor is failing, and I'm south-west of Rouen.'

'O.K. Yellow four. Try and make the far side of the Caen-Ouistrahan canal. You'll be O.K. there. Good luck.'

'O.K. Kelvin leader, I think I can make it.' (He did; and belly-landing in Allied lines, was returned to the squadron by the Navy next day).

Clouds thinning near the coast set his neck aching with redoubled searching of the sky. His cover was gone, he felt utterly lonely in his exposed solitude. If anything appears, he decided, he would go right down and hug the deck, though that would be a last resort. He needed as much height in hand as possible with a sea crossing of a hundred and sixty miles ahead.

But fortune was with him. The cliffs and beaches passed below without incident and he was well out over the Channel when Control welcomed him on the air.

'Hello Kelvin leader, this is Kingsley. If you need assistance transmit for a fix.'

'O.K., Kingsley. This is Kelvin leader transmitting for fix. My aircraft is damaged and I am returning alone. If fuel doesn't run out I think I can make base. Over.'

'Kingsley here. Steer zero-one-fife for your base. You have ninety miles to go.'

Ninety miles. Ninety long miles, with nothing in sight but sea and sky, and the shuddering of the damaged wing playing tricks with his imagination. The desolate feeling of loneliness, however, had gone. There was the companionship of contact with the ground station which was constantly passing new courses, and the knowledge that Air Sea Rescue were standing by, ready to do everything possible to help.

Hastings grew out of the haze, and he crossed the coast over the town before turning towards Dungeness.

Switching to base radio frequency he called. 'Hello, Newchurch, Kelvin leader here. My aircraft is damaged. I will fly low over you and I wish you to inform me of the condition of my starboard wing and undercarriage.'

Throttling back he decreased height to a few hundred feet over Rye and steadied the aircraft for a run across the Watch Office.

'Hello Newchurch. Kelvin leader approaching you.'

Dropping now to twenty feet he flew at the group, staring up outside the Watch Office, and lifted the wing at the last moment to curve up and away into the circuit.

'Kelvin leader, your starboard wheel fairing is projecting below the wing, but the wheel is not out.'

Good. Provided the damaged leg locked into position he should be able to make a normal landing. He pulled the undercarriage lever, and with a series of jolts the wheels came down. The cockpit lights flickered to the locked position. A final check run across the field, and the r/t confirmation: 'Your wheels are right down, sir.'

He brought the Tempest carefully into the approach, grinning at the glimpse out of the corner of his eye of the ambulance and fire tender moving out into the field just in case. Hold off, hold off. Let the port wheel touch first. Gently, gently. Now.

very carefully, let the Tempest settle on to the starboard wheel. He was down, down safely, and rolling smoothly to a standstill on the grass. With a feeling of unusual peace and contentment he taxied to dispersal. At last he had had the chance of proving the Tempest as an air-to-air fighter and it had come through with high honours.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FLYING BOMB

THE invasion was seven days old. Few enemy aircraft had ventured over the Channel for weeks, but on Romney Marsh, where once excise men had kept watch for smugglers, two members of the Royal Observer Corps automatically sharpened their vigilance with the approach of the danger period of first light.

Out of the brightening sky above the horizon, a speck of brilliant light grew into an aircraft winging its way towards them. The shape was unidentifiable. Much smaller than any standard fighter, the machine was flying at 2,500 feet and maintaining constant speed and direction. A ball of flame burnt at the tail and the engine had a most distinctive note, an intermittent *buzz, buzz, buzz.*

The Observer Corps spotter spoke quickly into his telephone. 'Diver!' he exclaimed, and the code word was passed instantly to 11 Group and headquarters of the Air Defence of Great Britain. The time was 3.53 a.m. June 13, Hitler's long-boasted secret weapon the V.1, short for *Vergeltungswaffe*, i.e. Revenge Weapon No. 1, had arrived. The battle of the flying bombs had begun.

The arrival of the pilotless plane was not unexpected. For two years British Intelligence had known that Germany was working on a new weapon, and in the spring of an aircraft of the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit brought back the vital clue in a photograph taken more than 30,000 feet above Peenemunde on the Baltic coast. A curious ramp fitted with rails looking like a pair of skis stuck on end into the snow, had been recently erected amidst the sand dunes. Microscopic examination of the photograph revealed a miniature aircraft on the ramp. It had no propeller, and immediately below it on the white sand was a tell-tale blot of black.

The sand had evidently been blackened by a blast of heat, which explained the absence of the propeller and meant that the machine was jet propelled. The size of the wings pointed to the weight of the machine that they would carry, and from this the probable bomb load was calculated. Measurement of the angle of climb indicated operational height and speed. In fact, from that minute speck, invisible to the naked eye, on the P.R.U. photograph, the scientists were able to construct a detailed picture of the height, speed, range, weight of explosive, accuracy of aim, and area of bombardment, that events were to prove extraordinarily correct.

In August 1913 Bomber Command attacked the Peenemunde experimental station from 8,000 feet with 2,000 tons of bombs and set back the German 'Revenge Weapons' by several months. That autumn similar distinctive ski-shaped launching sites began to appear in the Pas de Calais and Dieppe areas. These were regularly bombed and strafed with such success that Hitler was compelled to build large numbers of simpler, more easily constructed, sites which were skilfully camouflaged and hidden in farm buildings and woods in the hope that some at least would escape detection and destruction. The adage of safety in numbers held good, and sufficient sites survived to enable the long-delayed bombardment to begin in June

In the dispersal of Newchurch aerodrome, Dungeness, the Tempests were waiting at dawn readiness for offensive operations over the Continent, when the peculiar pulsating note of the engine drew them from the tent to watch what seemed to be a winged comet with a flaming tail, speed towards London. Two more they saw pass on their way, and still there was no ring on the dispersal telephone scrambling them into action against the strange new intruder.

Beamont lost patience and telephoned Group. 'Can't we do something about these things?' he asked.

'What can you do?' Group replied. 'They are flying bombs and the radar plots show their speed at 450 m.p.h.'

'Well at least let's have a crack at them,' Beamont said. 'I'll order cockpit readiness at full squadron strength.'

For two days the Tempests waited to go into battle against the flying bombs. The four V.1s which arrived on June 13, proved to be only a vanguard to test launching and range. In the lull that followed, the Germans were working frantically to complete their preparations. On the night of July 15 the mass assault started.

With dawn providing barely sufficient light for take-off the Tempests roared into the air and spread out on a patrol of the south-east coast. The coastline stood out sharply, edged with a white ruff of spume by a sea otherwise placid and molten, reflecting the sombre shade of a sky, still and grey with sleep. Flight in the early hours always brought a sense of peace and solitude which neither the presence of his number two, Flight Sergeant Cole, whom Beamont could see in position rocking gently to the starboard of his tail, nor the anticipation of what the day might bring, could quite dispel.

Since the days of the Battle of Britain each new sortie, each successive engagement had brought Beamont increasing confidence born of widening knowledge and experience. Contrary to the general belief that under the law of averages the more operations a man did. the greater the odds against him, Beamont always held that the more he operated, the better his chances of survival. In the beginning his one concern had been to keep alive long enough to learn sufficient about war in the air to be able to stay alive. There had been a dangerous phase when his flying hours touched the four hundred mark, and for a month or two he had been blindly convinced that he knew everything there was to know about flying and aerial combat. But he had successfully negotiated that stage of over-confidence in his immunity from the perils of the air, and, in recognizing it for what it was worth, had gained a stable, reasoned assurance in his competence. He was by nature too sensitive and possessed of far too vivid an imagination, however, for appreciation of his experience and ability to remove the apprehensive quivers of anticipation that were the inevitable prelude to every patrol. No matter how many trips he did, the nervous excitement was always there, clawing and shrinking the lining of his stomach until it found relief and forgetfulness in the first instant of action.

The flutter in his stomach was more marked than usual on that dawn of June 16, 1944. Absurd really, he told himself. It would be no more than target practice at a drogue. The flying bombs flew straight and level on a fixed heading and at a constant speed. There would be no dog-fight manœuvres, no return fire to dodge. As a combat mission it was an undoubted 'piece of cake'. Yet the very fact that there was no opposing pilot, the thought of going into action against robot instead of man, provoked a curious, eerie, sensation.

They had not long to wait before the code word, 'Diver', sounded on the radio, and they were vectored to a line running from between Dover and Folkestone to Calais. Shadowed by his number two, Beamont turned out over the Channel, his eyes never leaving the coast of France. He tried to puzzle out the best way of making an attack. The flying bomb's size, less than half that of an average fighter, and its speed were going to make a very difficult target. If the radar plot's figure of 450 m.p.h. were accurate, there would be no time for a second attack. The thing would have to be knocked out of the sky in the first, quick, power dive. That meant getting close enough for deadly accurate aim, but how close dare one get? If the bomb blew up in the air, what then? Bomber pilots reckoned on a safety height of 5,000 feet for dropping a four-thousand-pounder, but that was a hopeless guide. To hit the target at all you would have to think in terms of half the normal range for a fighter. A distance of three hundred, two hundred yards, maybe even less, if you were to make sure of stopping the thing from getting through to London.

The radio ended his musings. From the Folkestone sector, Flight Lieutenant John Musgrave was announcing the first success against Germany's new weapon. 'There was a terrific flash and the thing went down in a vertical dive into the sea,' he reported.

But Beamont had barely time to listen. They were emerging from a cloud patch at mid-Channel, and coming straight at them was the strange object, a small black speck carrying a pinhead of light. He took a quick compass check and, almost blacking out in the process, wheeled back at maximum power on to a reciprocal course to chase the V.1, which had already passed them, and was out of sight.

Anti-aircraft fire from Lympne put them back on its track but it was not until Maidstone that they saw it again, and it was obvious that they were going to see no more than its heels. If it were to be destroyed before reaching London, there was no chance of closing the range, and from between five and six hundred yards Beamont opened fire in a long burst that used up all his ammunition. Hits on the wing slowed the bomb considerably, and moving in, Cole completed the kill. The V.1 rolled on to its back and dropped to explode in a field near West Malling.

Two days later, after sharing a second destruction with Van Lierde, Beamont obtained his first solo success in circumstances which showed that although an automaton, the flying bomb could strike back at its attacker. He had a good thousand feet advantage when he sighted the V.1 ten miles north of Hastings, and he held his height as he raced on a closing course until the flying bomb was almost beneath him.

Straining and shuddering the Tempest roared into a dive at 450 m.p.h., and the orange flame of the flying bomb's jet slid into the gunsights. He pressed the firing button. Cannon strikes glinted and bounced like hail on the fuselage, but still the V.1 kept going.

Gone now was all consciousness of possible blast effect and minimum safety range. Gone was all thought except the one pressing, consuming, desire to shoot the winged automaton out of the sky. He stopped firing. With the advantage of the dive he was still flying faster than his target, and he waited tensely, closing another hundred yards with the jet of orange flame growing like a balloon in the gunsights. He held it there, steadying his aim. A long burst, this time, he decided; a long, steady burst. His thumb tightened on the firing button. The Tempest jerked with the recoil . . . and the sky was red and black.

Beamont ducked involuntarily at the sight of the sheet of flame and the thick, black smoke, and the scattering debris which for all he knew, might be fragments of his own aircraft as well as of the flying bomb. The Tempest bucked violently. A wing went down, and he was thrown against the side of the cockpit as the aircraft flipped over into a roll. He felt the scorching heat, and a smell of burning oil and burning paint. The sky had erupted and he was the core of the volcano.

'This is it,' he thought. The whirl of senses, the lights, the darkness, like going off under an anæsthetic. And there was no feeling, no emotion, just a numb acceptance of inevitability.

A moment later he was laughing at himself. The darkness and blast of heat had passed, and he opened his eyes to see the Sussex coastline above him. He had flown through the explosion of the flying bomb, and come out, upside down, on the other side. He righted the aircraft and checked for damage. His arms were sore, and his sleeves scorched from flames that had licked through the ventilator. A rain of burning oil had had splattered the windscreen and blackened and bubbled the paint on the wings and fuselage, but that was all. No serious harm had been done either to himself or the aircraft.

The experience of being thrown upside down was not unique. With a partial vacuum created at the heart of the explosion, aircraft which had no time to turn away and avoid flying through it, immediately lost their stability although the gyroscopic action of the engine was unaffected. Burnt paint and blistered arms became the trade-mark of those who blew up flying bombs in the air and lived to log their victories. For not all were lucky. Some in their keenness not to let the V.1 get away, fired from too short a range and were themselves blown up with the bombs that they destroyed.

In his next engagement Beamont was attacking one without result and he closed to a hundred and fifty yards before the V.1 finally blew up with the same frightening red flash and smoke and the same loss of stability. But this time two jarring cracks tossed him violently and when he came out of the turbulence at the other side of the explosion he found that his tail plane and radiator were damaged. He managed, however, to regain control and nurse the Tempest down for a successful landing.

Back at Newchurch he decided that it was time to end this period of trial and error, and map out a proper plan of tactics against the V.1. He went through in detail every combat report and drew up a summary of his findings. In those first three days his Tempest wing had destroyed less than half the number of sightings reported. Most of the abortive attacks had been made at a range of four hundred to three hundred yards, a distance at which misses were not surprising, considering that the wing thickness of the V.1 was only eight inches, and the diameter of the fuselage three feet. At the other end of the scale, damage from the explosion of the V.1 had been suffered by aircraft attacking within two hundred yards. The most satisfactory method of operation was undoubtedly to hit the wing so that the V.1 dropped straight down to explode in the sea or open country below. Even if that were adopted as the plan of attack, however, the target presented by the wing was so small that the risk of a stray shell setting off the explosive was always present.

Without doubt the safest and most efficient range narrowed down to two hundred yards, and Beamont promptly ordered all gunsights in the wing to be harmonized at that distance. Another lesson learnt in those first two or three days called for a quick modification of the standard pairs system of attack which had previously served so well in aerial combat. Against a human enemy with guns firing back, aircraft always weaved in evasive action as they went in to the attack. Against the flying bomb the Tempests were making long, straight attacks, and because of the lack of evasive action the expended cartridges from the first aircraft streamed back like a hail of bullets to damage the number two, following behind.

Raising the efficiency of the Tempest attacks was no more than a half-way measure. however. If the V.1 bombardment were to be frustrated, the crux of the matter lay in the sightings.

In the first place because of their shallow climb the V.1s were half way across the Channel before the early warning radar could pick them up. Although the initial estimates of their speeds at upwards of four hundred miles an hour had fortunately proved inaccurate, the speed range of 350 to 390 miles an hour at which they were actually arriving, meant that from the moment of the first detection by radar, they had a run of only three or four minutes before reaching the English coast. Their speed and small size made them very difficult targets to spot except in conditions of perfect visibility; and unless interception took place aft of either beam, the combined approach speed of around 800 miles an hour in a head-on interception, meant that by the time the fighter had been able to turn through 180 degrees to attack, the flying bomb was out of range. There was also little chance of a successful visual interception unless the fighter was travelling at more than 300 m.p.h. at the moment of sighting. Otherwise the V.1 was likely to be out of closing range before the aircraft could reach its maximum speed.

One other difficulty in interception over the sea was the absence of visual signposts. The drill was that immediately a V.1 was picked up on a radar plot, its height and direction were passed to the fighter on patrol. Two or three confirmations or adjustments followed, and then the pilot was given the estimated position at which the V.1 would cross the English coast. Raising his speed to the maximum the pilot promptly took up position in this neighbourhood, and searched out to sea along the appropriate bearing. Success depended upon the speed in which the V.1 could be sighted. Over land Control could help the pilot by giving not only the V.1's height and heading, but also its position in relation to some landmark. Over the Channel, however, one spot of sea was indistinguishable from any other.

With the difficulties scheduled methodically in his mind, Beamont settled down to consider how they could be most effectively overcome. When 'Dingbat' Saunders had told him to pick his aerodrome sites, he had stipulated that they must be within 170 miles radius of the Le Havre–Caen area. Presumably reckoned Beamont, he had wanted the Tempests ready in the path of Germany's secret weapon as the spearhead of the defence against it. (In actual fact all that Air Vice-Marshal Saunders had been concerned with was having the Tempests accessible for operations in the invasion area, if required; but inspired by the wrong conclusion to which he had jumped, Beamont viewed the flying bomb as the personal enemy of the Tempest.)

In addition to obtaining an increase in the number of sightings, the other immediate need in Beamont's opinion, was a removal of the outside interference which was hampering the Tempest attacks. Whenever a flying bomb appeared in the sky it was regarded as a general Aunt Sally for any gun in the vicinity whether airborne or on the ground. Slow fighters were joining in the chase without a chance of catching the V.1s, but with every success in getting in the way of the Tempests and causing them to break off their attack. Quite often, too, the Tempests were sprayed by bullets wildly aimed at the flying bomb. More serious still was the problem of the anti-aircraft fire, which was generally allowing insufficient deflection, and falling behind the V.1 into the path of the attacking aircraft. Altogether, mused Beamont ruefully, his Tempest wing had been taking more punishment from friendly gun fire and mid-air explosions than they would have done if the V.1 had been manned fighters.

He wrote out his report and flew to 11 Group with the following recommendation.

> Fighter patrols should be concentrated between Eastbourne and Dover in a belt extending 7,000 feet high and three miles out to sea. Within that operational area, guns should be restricted from firing, and all slow fighters should be withdrawn, leaving a clear field for the Tempests, some squadrons of special Spitfires, and Mustangs with increased boost. Observer Corps posts should be concentrated along that coastline at half-mile intervals and equipped with rockets to be fired towards the position of the V.1 reported on the radar plot. The converging rockets should help the patrolling fighter to sight the target quickly.

The Senior Air Staff Officer of 11 Group, 'Boy' Bouchier, (Air Vice-Marshal Sir Cecil Bouchier, K.B.E., C.B., D.F.C.) listened sympathetically. Like most Air Force men at the time he held the private view that the main benefit of the ack-ack artillery lay in sustaining the morale of the civilians by creating a lot of noise during a raid.

'Those brown jobs never have shot down anything to speak of,' declared Beamont with partisan indignation. 'The only reason they are hitting my Tempests is because they are aiming at something else.'

He was equally critical about the rest of the R.A.F. and U.S.A.F. fighters which in his opinion were making nuisances of themselves in what he regarded as Tempest preserves. He had the speeds ready to support his argument. At 2,000 feet, an average height for the V.1, the Tempest was capable of 408 m.p.h., and the Mustang could do 395 when it was uprated by increasing boost. The only other fighter which could approach the V.1's performance was the Spitfire XIV with a speed of 375 miles an hour at that height.

Both Saunders and Bouchier were men who had no time for red tape. They were always accessible without formality or delay to both wing and squadron commanders, and they believed in backing to the full the young officers who were doing the job. Within twenty-four hours Beamont's 'bind' had produced results. By day the prescribed area of concentration would be the exclusive hunting ground of the Tempests and selected Spitfire XIV and Mustang squadrons. By night the radar-equipped Mosquitos would carry the brunt of the defence in the air. Their lack of adequate speed would be balanced in part by the brilliance of the flame from the V.1's jet pipe, which at night was visible under good conditions for twenty miles. This warning enabled the Mosquitos to position themselves well above the approaching V.1 and attack in a power dive. To overcome the difficulty of judging distance at night against a brilliant light, a stereoscopic gunsight was specially designed. Through this the pilot saw two lights which closed into a single point when he was at the correct range.

Back at Newchurch the whole wing caught Beamont's enthusiasm that the Tempests should prove themselves the front-line defence against the flying bomb. All leave was cancelled. The armament section was mobilized on a twenty-four hour basis to cope with the problem of maintaining and replacing the 20-mm. cannon which was being fired three or four times a day in each of the thirty-six aircraft. Daily inspection, and minor and major overhauls were staggered to provide the maximum number of machines in the air for an indefinite period. Battle damaged aircraft which could not be repaired on the spot were frequently flown straight to Hawker's repair shops.

For nearly two months ground crews took time off only for sleep and worked eighteen hours in twenty-four, to maintain the continual servicing of aircraft right round the clock. Pilots lived at dispersal points, feeding on irregular meals brought in trucks from the cookhouse, and flying four or five sorties a day. From dawn to dusk there were always eight Tempests in the air, two patrolling in each of the four sectors between Dover and Eastbourne.

Squadrons whose maximum operational effort was normally regarded as five hundred to six hundred hours a month, were flying nine hundred and a thousand hours. It was an effort beyond reasonable demand on men and machines; but drawing something of the desperate strength of a beleagured fortress awaiting relief, the wing kept going, inspired by the pressing need to stop the bombs from reaching London until the invasion armies could over-run the launching sites. Overtaxed, the Spitfires and Mustangs faltered first from the wear and tear of running at increased boost on special fuel, and the Tempest squadrons were left to shoulder a still heavier burden.

Beamont fretted and fumed. With the help of the Observer Corps and their marker rockets, sightings had rapidly increased; and practice and the reassuring knowledge in the back of the pilots' minds that the new harmonization of the gunsights protected them from being dangerously close if the V.1 did explode in the air, brought a striking improvement in marksmanship. Whilst the R.A.F. as a whole were shooting down less than forty per cent of their sightings, Tempests were destroying more than eighty per cent of their targets. By the end of June, out of a total of 370 flying bombs destroyed altogether by fighters and anti-aircraft guns, the two Tempest squadrons had accounted for 232.

With its advantage in speed it was obvious that the Tempest at that stage in the battle was by far the best defence against the V.1, yet of Beamont's newly formed Tempest wing only two squadrons were equipped with that aircraft. The third squadron was having to make do with Spitfires. The Tempests that they should have been using were a twenty minutes' trip away in the hangars of the factory. Week after week they languished there whilst the men in the wing shop were on strike over some petty grievance and flying bombs that might otherwise have been shot into the sea, dropped instead on the Guards' chapel, and the schools and hospitals and the homes of the Londoners.

The strike was being kept a secret, and no doubt it was indiscreet of Beamont as a serving officer to give it as the truthful reason, when he was asked at a press conference why, as the aircraft was proving so successful, more Tempests were not being used against the V.1. If the leak helped at all to speed up the delivery of the Tempests the fact was not obvious. Not until some weeks after a gun-belt had been established and the prime responsibility was shifting from the fighters to the anti-aircraft batteries, was it possible to equip the third squadron. The repercussions that followed fell not upon the strikers, but upon Beamont in the form of unofficial reproofs and an attack by an extremist newspaper reporter for daring to insinuate that any workers were sabotaging the nation's safety.

As shooting down flying bombs lost its novelty and became a matter of routine, the more venturesome pilots sought to test their skill with alternative methods of destruction. Beamont's first success without firing a shot occurred by accident.

He was following a radar track over cloud. From the reports over his radio telephone, he knew that he must be getting close to the V.1, and when he found a hole in the cloud three miles inland from Hastings, he decided to get underneath the layer to look for his target. He put the nose of the Tempest down, and immediately caught his breath. Emerging from the misty wisps of cloud and headed straight in his path was the shadowy shape of a flying bomb. In that glimpse he knew that he had no time to pull out of the dive or turn away from the bomb. His only hope lay in getting across the track of the V.1 first. Instinctively he jammed the throttle wide open and leant against the control column thrusting it as far forward as it would go and pushing the Tempest into a full power dive. For a horrifying moment he had a plan view of the small midwing monoplane with its single fin above the jet of orange flame, and the fuselage filled with a ton of explosive; and then the nose of the V.1 leaped vertically past his cockpit and was gone. With the wings trembling and vibrating under the strain he pulled out of the dive into a climbing turn and tore round to attack.

His eyes blinked in disbelief. The target had disappeared. He searched the sky intently and at last spotted below him an orange ball sprouting wings, which disappeared in a flash and a mushroom of smoke and the soil of the Sussex Downs. The Tempest's slipstream had upset the robot plane's gyro control and sent it plunging to earth.

Soon afterwards Beamont remembered the incident. The Germans seldom sent over the V.1s singly but launched them usually in waves of half-a-dozen or more. Beamont shot down one at the coast and chased after a second. He caught it near West

Malling, and opened fire from two hundred yards. The guns gave one short burst and stopped. He was out of ammunition.

Beamont cursed. There was no other fighter in the vicinity to take over the target. He drew in closer until he was flying alongside, formating on the V.1. He eyed it calculatingly. If he could tilt up one wing, that should send the robot over in a dive to earth. It was not an operation he relished. A touch of the wings was liable to swing the Tempest and flying bomb straight into one another and blow them both to fragments. But was it really necessary to hit the wing? His slipstream had done the trick before, although there could not be much future in making a habit of diving so closely past a flying bomb's nose.

He thought quickly. Surely the V.1 could be upset by the airflow over the top of his wing without the need for any dangerous direct contact. Carefully he edged closer, dropping slightly and sliding the wingtip of the Tempest underneath that of the V.1. The wings rose and fell, wavered and then rushed alarmingly towards one another. He kicked the rudder and skidded sharply away out of danger. Recovering he saw unhappily that the V.1 was still on its course for London. He swung back into position and once again began to crab carefully towards the flying bomb.

His nerves were tense, willing the wing to stay steady, as slowly converging, they raced towards London at 380 m.p.h. Once he dipped his wing and slithered in until the tip was below that of the V.1. Checking and holding off, and alert for the feel of the slightest suggestion of turbulence in the airflow, he cautiously raised his wing. The gap between the machines narrowed to six inches. Anticipating every movement, he steadied the Tempest and held her rigid, watching breathlessly. Then, painfully slowly it seemed, the airflow over the Tempest's wing took effect. The wing of the flying bomb lifted and the V.1 heeled over in a dive to earth.

The arrival of the new proximity fused shells, an idea originated in this country and developed in America, gave strength to the demands of the Army that the gun belt round London should be concentrated at the coast. The proximity fuse was designed to set off a shell once it came within a certain distance of the target. The destructive force of the explosion was therefore effective

CHAPTER XIV

SHOT DOWN

No answering enthusiasm from Group headquarters met the eagerness with which the Tempest wing arrived in Brussels at the end of September. To members of the 2nd Tactical Air Force to which the wing had been posted, they were the 'stay in England boys', the 'get your picture in the papers boys'. Even Air Vice-Marshal Broadhurst in his address of welcome stressed that they would find things vastly different on the Continent. 'Here the targets fight back, you know,' he said.

But if the flying bombs had not shot back, they had provided high-speed targets which brought the marksmanship of the Tempest wing to a standard that outclassed most fighter units. And even as Beamont tried to control his indignation, a message arrived through airfield control from 56 Squadron who, led by S/L. Coates-Preedy, were already on their first patrol for 2nd T.A.F.

'You may be interested to see this, sir,' said Beamont as Broadhurst finished his address. 'It has just come in.' He handed him the signal. Encountering a large formation of F.W.109s the patrolling Tempests had destroyed four, and claimed one probable, and another damaged.

A few days later, on October 1, the Tempest wing was moved to Volkel, the most forward main base in the British sector of the front. Dramatically, with a German battery only two-and-a-half miles away, the war was intruding in a fashion that Beamont had not known since he had left France in the spring of 1940. War was no longer confined to isolated seconds of pent-up activity in air combat or ground-strafing sorties, and air raids to which he had become accustomed. Air fighting took place now against a background of regular barrages from ground batteries. On the flight to Volkel Beamont had suffered a direct hit in the starboard tailplane from 37mm. flak, and Warrant Officer Reid of 3 Squadron had been shot down whilst actually in the circuit of the aerodrome.

Next day on a low-level patrol over Nijmegen Beamont destroyed an F.W.190. 'Pleasant scrap with 15/20 F.W.190s over town,' he entered in his log book. 'Huns tried to dive away. Caught one at 510 m.p.h. and shot him down in flames near Cleve. Much flak.'

It was to be his last victory. For him the sands of combat warfare were rapidly running out. Almost as if fate were intervening with a chance to stay the inevitable, Philip Lucas arrived at Volkel on October 10 in a Spitfire. He had obtained permission from Fighter Command to invite Beamont to return to Langley in the near future on completion of his third tour of operations; and then on discharge from the R.A.F., to join Hawker's as Number 2 experimental test pilot.

Beamont hesitated. The idea was attractive, and held out good prospects of becoming chief test pilot within a reasonable period. In peacetime there was nothing he would have more desired. But this was not peacetime. This was war in its most dramatic stage, full of action and inspiration from the exciting knowledge of the approaching climax of victory.

'Can you leave it open for a while?' he suggested. Out of 491 operational sorties totalling 630 hours, he had done 94 sorties over enemy territory. It would be nice, he thought, to round off the century. 'Let me do that first,' he said, 'and then I'll think about it.'

Philip Lucas stayed to watch Beamont demonstrate the Tempest the next day for a news film camera team. During the display whilst he was diving at over 500 m.p.h. the main port fuselage side panel fell off, striking the tail-plane which had only just been repaired after the flak damage. His personal aircraft, 'R.B.', was out of commission again.

By the next morning he had made up his mind and accepted the offer. The opportunity was too good to risk jeopardizing, but before he left the wing he was going to round off the hundred sorties. He could have them finished in less than a week.

He watched Philip Lucas take off for England, and returned to his operations caravan. Almost immediately there was a call for an armed reconnaissance by two squadrons of the Munster area with particular attention to Rheine, the centre of the Me.262 jet fighter-bomber.

Standing on the steps of the caravan Beamont briefed his pilots. 'Remember,' he finished, 'the ground strike policy is a single surprise attack, disengage between trees where possible. Unless circumstances are particularly unusual and I alter the briefing in the air, there is to be no more than one pass over the target. There is no sense in giving the flak a second chance.'

'R.B.' was still in maintenance having the tail-plane repaired, and he had to borrow another Tempest. A pity, he thought, as he settled in the cockpit. Theoretically one Tempest was the same as another, but as with any aircraft, each machine had its individual peculiarities and characteristics, its own feel and atmosphere; and for 'R.B.', he had developed an intimacy and affection which welded them into a team that was something more than a pilot flying an aircraft. He raised his hand to give the signal to taxi out, but stopped quickly. Low over the aerodrome swooped a formation of Me.262s, scattering anti-personnel bombs.

When the noise and the dust had cleared, the runway was found to be unserviceable, and the Tempests had to taxi to the other end of the aerodrome to take off down wind. He led the wing straight on to course for Rheine at 2,000 feet, crossing the front at Reichwald Forest. The unexpectedly long taxi run had left them with little margin of petrol to spare. A retaliation raid on the Me.262 aerodrome, and then straight back to base would be about all they could manage.

The flat open border country between the Netherlands and Germany ran beneath them. They picked up the Rhine and the railway track between Nijmegen and Bocholt: and then travelling west along the line came a sight so unusual that it was almost an affront. For weeks past the 2nd Tactical Air Force prided themselves that enemy communications by day had been brought to a standstill; but here speeding across open country with no chance of cover, was an exceptionally long train. Its length and the fact that the suicidal risk of daytime travel was considered worth taking, marked it as of vital importance, Beamont decided.

Sending 56 Squadron to sweep the primary target at Rheine, he wheeled 3 Squadron round for a beam attack.

'Hello Corncob aircraft,' he called. 'Echelon for attack to port, go!'

Already, as he dived leading the attack, the train was pulling up, and the length of it was seething into a swarming mass of jumping, tumbling, soldiers, dashing madly from the still moving coaches to throw themselves flat on the grass. He raked the train steadily in a long burst, and pulling out of the dive on the far side, circled to watch the rest of the squadron follow one after the other into the attack. Light flak, rising from a gun position immediately behind the engine, ceased quickly under a flurry of shell bursts.

A troop train with so many hundred of soldiers lying in the field alongside, was a target that justified departure from his policy of not ground-strafing the same objective twice, Beamont decided, and he spoke into his microphone: 'Hello Corncob aircraft. Anyone out of ammunition orbit five miles south. The rest follow me in again.'

Machine-gun and small-arms fire from soldiers lying on their backs, greeted the second attack but did no apparent damage as the Tempests exhausted their ammunition. There was no more to be done, but in a moment of restlessness which contradicted his carefully worked out plans and policy, Beamont could not leave well alone. For his third run over the train there was no excuse. He was out of ammunition, and he had no one but himself to blame for going down again.

Curious to know the effect of the attack, he dived low and flew down the length of the train. The puffs and flashes of the machine-gun fire from the troops in the field did not disturb him, but the flak truck, reopening fire at point blank range as he drew level with the engine, caught him unexpectedly. Someone had courageously climbed back on to the train to man the guns.

Though he knew the flak must have been close, Beamont felt no jar or impact from the bullet that had evidently entered his radiator. It was not until the squadron had reformed on him that he knew he had been hit.

'Corncob leader,' reported his number two. 'You are streaming smoke.'

Beamont looked at his instruments. The radiator temperature was soaring dangerously high. Putting the propeller into coarse pitch, he called up the deputy leader and told him to take the squadron home.

Home. He was only thirty miles from the British lines, and the voice of his own Control passing homing instructions, was in his earphones. But he knew from the start there was no hope of reaching base. With the engine running rough, getting hotter and hotter, the aircraft shaking with vibration, he covered ten miles before the motor seized. He was at 2,000 feet, over heavily wooded territory.

'Bale out!' called his number two. 'Corncob leader, bale out!'

Beamont dismissed the idea at once. Below was the German front line, a heavily fortified area, full of troops. He had no wish to be shot at all the way down in a parachute descent, and even though there was no sign of a possible landing place, it seemed preferable to stay in the machine, and take his chance in crash landing in the forest. Holding the Tempest in a glide, he watched the tree tops come to meet him.

With memories of his crash-landing at Deal, he put an arm on the gunsight, and braced himself. Fragments of time seemed interminable as he awaited the shock of the crash; and then at the last minute, came a strange, urgent compulsion to turn to port. Obediently he applied left rudder, skidding the aircraft round forty-five degrees. The tops of the trees were very close now. If he banked, he would take off the wing tip and turn over with them. He checked quickly, holding the aircraft as straight and steady as he could. Speed was dropping rapidly. He could hear the rustle of his passage, a soft, drowsy, sighing through leaves warm with autumn tints glowing in the sunshine. A line from Tennyson came to him: 'And murmuring of innumerable bees.' He could not have heard or read the line since he was at school. Yes, on just such an afternoon when the sun streamed through the window on to his face, and the warmth in contrast to the autumn chill, brought a similar feeling of drowsiness and desire to escape to woods or river or rolling downs. It was as if for a moment he were two persons. A body, braced, and expectant, that had become fused into the aircraft; and a mind, apart and unconcerned, that had no time for the present.

The topmost straggling branches were reaching out, grasping at him. Cautiously he raised the nose, trying to choose the best possible place for the inevitable crash. It could be no more than a matter of seconds, he knew. He reconciled himself to the inevitable. And then, unexpectedly the forest miraculously ended, and with violent control movements he brushed down through the branches of the edging trees into a haven of paddock, an isolated clearing in the midst of the thickly wooded region. Wire and dangling posts of the near fence wrapped itself around the nose and wings but failed to stay the Tempest as it ploughed across the field, slithered over a ditch and came to rest on the far side.

Beamont jumped out unharmed and threw the emergency incendiary bomb into the cockpit. The aircraft took a despairingly long time to catch fire before he could set off down the lane at the edge of the field, into the woods. He was wearing a gabardine golfing jacket over his uniform. Put a reasonable distance between the burning aircraft and himself, he thought, and there was no reason why he should not pass as a civilian.

The obvious thing to do was to make for the Rhine, and try to hide up in the woods until the Allies crossed the river. He had no pocket compass to guide him, and he headed towards the sun which was descending in the western sky. He had been going for about half-an-hour when he grew conscious that someone was following him.

He looked round. A boy in the early teens, wearing the black shorts and shirt of the Hitler Jugend movement, was tracking slowly behind him on a bicycle.

What now, wondered Beamont: knock the kid out and take the bicycle? No, he could not bring himself to attempt strong-arm tactics against the boy. Trying to take no notice, he continued to walk with apparent unconcern; but still the boy stayed with him.

Somehow he had to shake off the boy before they encountered anyone else. Without warning he turned off the path straight into the woods, and quickened his pace. Still the boy followed, pedalling furiously through the undergrowth, bumping over tree roots and rough ground. But soon the distance between them was increasing as the boy tired under the heavy going. At last Beamont looked back and found no sign of him.

Veering back in the direction of the sun, he continued his trek west. Unexpectedly he came to another clearing, a field in which a dozen men and women were hoeing beets. They had obviously seen him as soon as he saw them, and he quelled the inclination to dodge back into the woods. That might invite suspicions which did not yet exist. Instead he trudged boldly along the side of the field. Some of the farm labourers glanced at him with idle curiosity, but they took no more notice and continued with their work.

Beamont's morale rose. This was the first reassurance he had that his presence was not shouting 'I am an R.A.F. officer'. Provided that he was doing something, going somewhere, and not hanging around, he might well avoid attracting attention. But he ought to keep to paths and proper tracks, and not look as if he were trying to hide.

He picked up the lane again. His confidence was short lived, Spasmodic bursts of machine-gun fire rang out from the woods behind him. It was unmistakably the noise of searching, searching for someone with hosepiped sprays of bullets into ditches and undergrowth.

Nerving himself Beamont stuck to his policy of unconcern, and continued steadfastly along the lane, until suddenly round a bend, with guns at the ready, came a party of ten Wehrmacht Reserve veterans, in the charge of a young corporal. With them, shouting excitedly, was the boy on the bicycle.

Beamont raised his hands.

PART TWO

BIRD IN CAGE

CHAPTER XV

INTO CAPTIVITY

With his arms held high and the corporal's schmeisser automatic pistol directed at his back, Beamont was marched to a farmhouse that had been taken over as a Wehrmacht Reserve post. A vicious push between the shoulder blades sent him headlong into a room, bare except for a trestle table littered with forms, a telephone and a chair. Beamont regained his balance and turned to protest, but the corporal cut him short, gesturing with the gun to keep his hands above his head.

'Maps,' he snapped in English. 'Maps!' he slapped a hand over Beamont's clothing, removed a wallet of five cigars and pocketed a pair of sun-glasses. Satisfied at last that his captive was carrying no maps, and nothing else that he fancied, the corporal went to the telephone.

Cautiously Beamont lowered his arms. The rest of the party that had crowded into the room, watched him with indifference. Veterans from the 1914–18 war who had been called up into the reserve as the last stranglehold tightened around the Third Reich, they shared no part in their teen-age N.C.O.'s bullying demeanour and showed surprsingly little hostility. The heat of battle had long grown cold within their veins and an air of resignation to the inevitable consequences of war lay heavily upon them. It was as a statement of fact, evoking neither satisfaction nor regret, that one of them announced in laborious English: 'For you the war is over.'

Beamont nodded, and the soldiers joined in the nodding, then lapsed into awkward silence.

Now that he had asserted his authority over the English officer and reported the capture, the corporal was content to leave Beamont alone. There was nothing to do but wait, wait, standing wearily, staring out of the window across the fields at the pine trees in the distance.

The absence of emotion with which the German had delivered the sentence, emphasized the finality of the words. 'For you the war is over.' And yet it could not be. His mind slightly benumbed, Beamont baulked at accepting the truth. He felt curiously detached as if the whole scene were an illusion and he were playing no part in its reality. It was unthinkable that he would not be back in his Operations caravan that evening, planning the next day's programme of wing sweeps against aerodromes and communications.

An open Mercedes tourer with two German officers stopped outside the window. Beamont was motioned into the back of the car. The officers ignored him. He might have been an inanimate object of equipment that they were collecting. Only when the road took them past the field in which the remains of the Tempest still burned, did one of the officers acknowledge his existence by commenting over his shoulder: '*Ach! Schpitfeuer!*'

Beamont nodded. If they liked to think he was a Spitfire pilot, he was not going to disillusion them.

They drove quickly through the flat Dutch border country until houses began to build up into the outskirts of a town, and with it came a vicious change in atmosphere.

Since he had landed, Beamont had given little thought to the public attitude towards him. As a prisoner-of-war he was entitled to certain standards of treatment. That was all that concerned him. The people at work in the fields had been disinterested; the corporal had made a show of asserting authority, but the other soldiers had treated him with indifference and, like the two officers, for the most part ignored him. But as they entered Wesel Beamont was assailed by an uneasy animal scent alerting him to a threat of danger: an aggressive animosity of hatred and ill-will focused against himself.

His fatigue was banished by foreboding, for premonition it still was. The streets were almost deserted. The twitch of window curtains and the few abroad in the chilly October dusk who turned to glare, were insufficient manifestation to warrant this growing embarrassment and lonely self-consciousness.

News of the capture of an English airman had preceded them, and as they drew up outside the Wehrmacht building a crowd surged round the car, sneering and muttering against the '*terrorfliege*'. Beamont heard the word in dismay. It had never occurred to him that he might be regarded as a 'terror flier' striking fear into the hearts of the women and children. And he was not, he protested inwardly, with an indignant sense of injustice that stiffened his previous self-consciousness into a hard defensive shell. He had always been at pains to wage war against military forces and to leave the civilians as far as possible, out of it. That was the joy and satisfaction of air-to-air warfare in which on comparatively equal terms like gladiators of old, the fighter pilot matched the quality of his aircraft and armament and pitted his own skill against the enemy's. He suffered no recriminations of conscience. The oft-decried school doctrine of English correctness and observance of rules was still strong within him, and it was a point of pride that he fought cleanly. Even on interdiction sorties he had tried to avoid strafing the coaches of civilian passenger trains. Unless he was satisfied beyond doubt that a train was carrying troops or military supplies —a fact invariably obvious in the first minute by the presence of a flak truck—he had religiously contented himself with attacking the engine.

The moral indignation and resentment at the label stuck on him by the German crowd, gave him strength against the chill of apprehension induced by the menacing attitude. For a moment he saw a prisoner-of-war camp as a haven of safety and security. Once there he would be all right, but until then—until then, anything could happen and no one back home would be any the wiser. He had read of negro lynching in the United States, but for the first time he understood the reality of mob desire to do violence. The force of concentrated ill-will against him was unpleasantly apparent.

For minutes that were each an age, he sat there poker-faced and motionless, steeling himself against the taunts and insults, concentrating upon avoiding any sign of reaction that might fire the crowd into a physical onslaught.

With relief he saw at last two soldiers come out of the post. At the sight of them the crowd fell back making a gangway and the muttering dwindled as they awaited the next move. Beamont was motioned out of the car and pushed through the crowd into the sidecar of a motor-cycle combination. A guard with an automatic pistol across his knees took up position on the pillion behind the dispatch rider. The engine fired, ripping the silence and starting off a renewed outbreak of booing and shouting from the crowd as they watched their '*terrorfliege*' borne away from them.

Within hours life had become a matter of comparisons. It was a relief to reach the Luftwaffe flak headquarters and the reassurance of military civilization after the wrath of civilian barbarism. There, he was in the hands of the enemy, but he was in the hands of those who might at least show an understanding of the fighting man and his deeds. The warmth too was welcome after the continuous sleet and bitter cold of the journey, and Beamont could even be amused by the doubts the Germans cast upon his rank.

'Sergeant?' they kept repeating. 'Sergeant pilot?'

'Wing Commander,' retorted Beamont. 'Wing Commander.'

The military police shook their heads. '*Nein! Nein!* No Wing Commander. Pilot Officer? Pilot Officer?'

Reaching under his golfing jacket, Beamont pulled out the shoulder strap of his battledress blouse, and pointed to the three rings. 'Wing Commander,' he said again.

The Germans looked at the insignia doubtfully, and a book of ranks and badges was produced. Checking with the illustrations, they admitted with considerably more interest that he must be an '*Oberst leutenant*'.

Establishment of his rank brought a bowl of vegetable soup for dinner in the officers' mess, before the journey to Dulag Luft headquarters, Frankfurt, continued in an Opel, with an armed driver and a guard with a sub-machine-gun in front, and a young Luftwaffe officer escorting him in the back. Beamont's non-committal grunts finally put paid to attempts at conversation, and the officer started to go to sleep. Neither the driver nor the sentry was paying any attention to the passenger in the back, and for the first time since his capture Beamont began to think without interruption or distraction. If he could get to an airfield. . . .

Not for a moment did the notion strike him as fantastic. He had flown both a Messerschmitt and an F.W.190 at Farnborough, and he was confident that once in a cockpit, he could get away as quickly as if he were taking off from his own Tempest base. He summoned up mental photographs of the front-line enemy aerodromes which he had strafed, striving to recollect in detail their positions, layout, and the surrounding area. A wave of optimism swept through him. He must make for the Rhine, hide up in the woods on the outskirts of an aerodrome, and wait his chance.

He was wide awake now, snapping out of the reverie induced by his own fatigue, and the soporific drone of the car as it hurried through the night. He eyed the door handle. The threat would come from the officer beside him. He would shoot straight after him; but in the time it would take for the car to stop, and the sentry to swing round his sub-machine-gun, Beamont reckoned he should have reached the woods. There under cover of darkness, he should stand a reasonable chance of eluding his pursuers.

The Luftwaffe officer had stopping snoring and settled into regular slumber. In front the driver and guard seemed relaxed and unconcerned, lulled by the night drive into worlds of their own drowsings. At what speed, he wondered, dare he risk taking the plunge?

Fifty, forty, thirty—thirty should be safe enough; and the car should slow to near thirty on taking a corner. In fact, cornering with the centrifugal force operating against the direct momentum of the body and helping to slow him down, was the obvious choice. The first bend, then, it would be.

He considered the question of leaving the car. Head down, knees up, rolling himself into a ball, he supposed. Not an attractive prospect. He wished he knew for certain what the best way was.

Translating the passing minutes into miles, Beamont waited tensely for the first bend, but the autobahn stretched endlessly ahead. When at last the car did turn, it swung off unexpectedly down a side road, and Beamont was unprepared.

The Opel continued down the country road at the same speed until a level-crossing gate halted it. Hooting awakened no sign of life from the gate-keeper's cottage, and first the driver, and then the guard left the car to rouse the man.

Beamont studied the officer closely. Though his eyes were closed, he could hardly be sleeping after the jerk with which the car had stopped, and the subsequent noise of the horn. Disarm him, jump into the front seat, and race the Opel back towards the West. With set face he turned to put his plan into action, and stopped in his tracks. The Luftwaffe officer was sitting up, a hand on the door, looking at Beamont as if he could read his captive's thoughts.

'Would you like to relieve yourself, Wing Commander?' he asked, stepping into the road.

Somewhat disconcerted, Beamont followed as the German walked to the side of the road and stood by a ditch with his back towards him. His hands were in front. In the gloom he appeared to be undoing his clothing.

Doubts entered Beamont's mind. He could not believe that a guard could act so stupidly. Stealthily he moved closer. Though the need for urgency was desperately upon him his mind seemed curiously detached from physical haste, as it took the decision to strike the man on the back of the neck, topple him into the ditch and dash for the car.

He was within striking distance when the Luftwaffe officer swung round pointing a revolver at him. It was the holster not his dress, that he had been undoing.

The German's lips were curled into the sneer of a smile. 'When you have finished, Wing Commander,' he said. 'We will return to the car.'

By the time they had reached the Luftwaffe Interrogation Centre at Frankfurt dawn was close at hand. Beamont was pushed into an evil smelling cell, the main feature of which was a powerful electric heater fitted into the ceiling. He noticed drowsily that the heat was very welcome after the long cold drive, and then, without bothering to take in any further details of his new home, dropped on to the plank bed and fell straight into sleep, too exhausted to feel the hardness of the boards.

Moments later, it seemed, there was a stamping and a clanging and a gutteral voice shouting: '*Raus! Raus! Raus!*' It was a word that he was to know well during his captivity, as the theme of the guards, an omnibus word doing duty for every possible imperative; 'Get up, shut up, get out, go in, stop, go!'

Drowsily Beamont strove to put the disturbance from him and clung to sleep that delayed the facing of reality. The guard shouted again, grabbed Beamont by the shoulder and pulled him off the plank bed on to the stone floor.

Beamont scrambled angrily to his feet. He was an officer, he stormed, a Wing Commander. How dare a private soldier lay hands on an officer! He would report this insolence and manhandling. . . .

If the guard did not understand the words, he understood the tone. His hands slid along the rifle and lifting it by the barrel, he swung. Beamont's arm went up instinctively and his shoulder broke the force of the blow before the rifle butt slid off against the side of his head and sent him reeling across the bed.

Again the German raised his rifle. '*Raus! Raus!*' he threatened.

Painfully Beamont lurched to his feet. The guard looked at him, and stamped out of the cell.

Beamont sat down on the plank bed, gently massaging his shoulder and trying to shake the ache out of his head. He could hear now the clanging of doors and the repeated shouts of '*Raus! Raus!*' echoing along the corridor. Amost immediately the guard reappeared, thrusting a broom at him and making motions for Beamont to sweep out the cell.

Beamont eyed the broom balefully. He had never been a barrack-room lawyer, but a foolhardy urge insisted on his rights. He was a British officer and entitled to be treated with the respect due to his rank. Surely it was against the conventions for an R.A.F. Wing Commander to sweep out a cell at the behest of a private. If anyone should be doing the sweeping, obviously it was the German soldier. It was equally evident to Beamont that if his rank were to be respected, he must make a stand for his rights from the start, and refuse to be intimidated.

The guard was losing patience. He shook the broom again. Beamont ignored it and glared at him.

The broom clattered to the floor and the guard raised his rifle. Slowly Beamont stooped down and picked up the broom.

Not that there was much to sweep anyway. Two-and-a-half paces took him across the width, and four paces down the length of the grimy whitewashed walls. Apart from the heater in the ceiling which had become uncomfortably hot and allowed no escape from its rays, the cell furnishings were confined to a naked electric light bulb, the plank bed and a mattress cover almost barren of wood shavings. There were no blankets and no chair. For ventilation there was an air brick high up near the ceiling, and below it a small square window heavily shuttered on the outside.

Breakfast arrived in the shape of a mug of acorn coffee and a piece of black bread which he could not bring himself to eat. The black bread was back again at the end of the afternoon with a bowl of watery soup for his other meal of the day.

At daylight the window shutters were removed and he was given the sight of a small square piece of sky. By standing on tiptoe and pulling up with his fingers, he could catch a glimpse of countryside under a heavy hoar frost with a hill of pine trees hummocked against the horizon. A German labour gang were making their way to the forest, singing a marching song as they went. The wind carried the song to him, echoing across the frozen bell-like air: a strange primitive chant, that reminded him acutely of his own strangeness and sense of friendlessness. He began to feel chilly; and then he realized that more than the psychological effects of the song were making him cold. The heater had been switched off.

With the icy wind whistling through the ventilator, the temperature dropped quickly. The film of sweat that had at first encased him started to freeze against his skin. His fingers and feet began to go numb. He stamped up and down, backwards and forwards, along the six foot length of the stone prison. Swinging his arms, slapping his thighs, he tried to keep the circulation going.

For an hour or more he shivered; and then as suddenly as it had gone off, the ceiling heater was on again, burning at full power. It was useless to complain. Something was wrong with the heating system, he was told with sardonic politeness. It would be fixed as soon as possible.

For three days Beamont was left alone with nothing to occupy him but the extremes of heat and cold, as the heater was switched on and off at irregular intervals, and his own thoughts. He saw no one but the guard who snarled '*Raus! Raus!*' each morning, but otherwise maintained a sullen silence as he thrust into the cell breakfast of acorn coffee and black bread, and dinner of black bread and vegetable soup, and twice a day marched him to the *abort* at the end of the corridor. The latrine was the only facility. There was no question of washing or shaving.

His fastidious nature recoiled from the cocoon of squalor and unkemptness that time was wrapping about him. He sought anxiously for a means of maintaining self-respect. He reserved his dirty handkerchief as a toothbrush for rubbing his teeth and gums. In lieu of washing, he took off and shook his shirt and vest. But the plank bed gave him the most satisfying idea. Regularly when the heater was on at full power he placed his battledress under the mattress and lay on them. The knife-edge crease in his trousers became an outward symbol of triumph over circumstances, and provided a satisfaction that did much to keep at bay the thoughts upon which he had been left to brood.

On the third evening a German intelligence officer entered the cell. A smallish, middle-aged, white haired man, he had a smooth smile and a smooth voice.

'I am Blackie Schwartz, your interrogation officer,' he announced pleasantly, 'but we won't bother about that yet. First we must establish your identity and notify the Red Cross that you are safe.'

Beamont glanced through the questionnaire headed with a large red cross, filled in his name, rank and number, and handed back the form.

'That won't do,' said Schwartz pleasantly. 'We cannot send on the form incomplete like this.'

'If our roles were reversed,' retorted Beamont, 'I should not expect you to tell me anything but your name, rank and number.'

Another two days Beamont was left to his own devices, before the guard hustled him into a large office, with a red swastika on the wall, dominating the room. At a desk in front sat an Oberst in black uniform, as clean and elegant as Beamont was dirty and dishevelled. But Beamont was not discomfited. His trouser crease at least was the equal of the German's.

'I am sorry I have not been able to see you before, Wing Commander,' said the Oberst after a long wait. The trouble is we handle so many of your people here. Business is very good! Flying Officer Clapperton was in last week. Did you know he was fit?'

Beamont tried to look blank and hoped he had given no sign of recognition of the name, a member of his own Tempest wing, who had been shot down a fortnight before himself.

The Oberst let the silence pass. 'Well, now, let us have a look at these questions to establish your identity for the Red Cross, which you refuse to answer. Married or single? You are married, are you not, Wing Commander? And presumably you would like your wife to know that you are alive? Very well, then, we can safely fill in "Married".' The Oberst scribbled on the form. 'And your age and religion?—are these vital military secrets, Wing Commander?'

Beamont stared obstinately at the German's forehead and said nothing. The Oberst put down his pencil. 'You are being absurdly unreasonable, Wing Commander,' he snapped.

'You see, Wing Commander,' he continued in a more conciliatory manner, 'we know who you are. A very famous person whose feats are as much admired by us as your own countrymen. It is not as if you could tell us anything that we do not know, Wing Commander Roland Prosper Beamont, who has been test flying at the Hawker factory, and recently returned to lead a Tempest wing from Coltishall. . . .'

Beamont fought to hide any surprise as the recital continued; and then he realized that although accurate in surprising detail, the information was a month out of date. The Germans believed that the Tempests were still operating from England.

With renewed alertness he dropped his gaze and looked down on the desk. The familiar cover of an aeronautical magazine, sticking out from some papers caught his attention. Observing his glance the Oberst picked up the copy.

'Have you seen this, Wing Commander?' he asked pleasantly, holding out the open pages. It was a current issue which he had not seen, and contained a feature on himself in a series on fighter pilot personalities.

'The Tempests are very good aircraft,' remarked the Oberst, 'but not quite so fast as our new Me.109s, do you think?'

Beamont handed back the magazine. 'I wouldn't know.'

The pretence and pleasantries vanished. The veneer was gone. 'I do not see how we can send on this form,' said the Oberst harshly. 'That means that no one in your country will know you are alive.'

He paused. 'There is one other thing. At present you are under the protection of the military forces, but we have implicit instructions to hand over anyone who is unco-operative to the Gestapo.'

The Oberst waited for the reaction which did not come. 'You have heard of the Gestapo, Wing Commander?' he prompted. 'I should not like to have to hand you over to the Gestapo.'

He pressed a buzzer for the guard, and studied Beamont with deliberation. 'If on thinking it over, Wing Commander, you decide you would like to be a little more co-operative in helping us to get the news of your safety to England, and yourself to a proper camp with better amenities, you can always ask to see me again.'

The door of his cell slammed, and Beamont was left to his thoughts. The prospect of Gestapo interrogation was not pleasing, and there was little comfort in trying to reassure himself that the Germans could not hand him over. The memory of the shooting of the recaptured officers after the great escape from Stalag Luft III was strong in his mind. The Germans would take just as much notice of the Geneva Convention as they pleased.

But it was upon just these things, he realized, that the Oberst intended him to brood. The outlook was better not considered until it was upon him.

The ceiling heater was on at full blast. Quickly he busied himself removing his trousers and pressing them on the bed. He hoped the Oberst had noticed the crease in his trousers.

CHAPTER XVI

REALISTS

HARSHNESS and discomfort gave place to friendliness and privileges, contrasts designed to bully or wheedle information from prisoners still in the initial shock and uncertainty of captivity; and eleven days later, having survived insults and challenges, invitátions to broadcast to his family, and threats of the Gestapo, Beamont was sent to the despatch centre to be kitted with an airman's greatcoat, a khaki pullover, and half a Red Cross parcel as rations for the journey to Stalag III at Sagen, near Breslau.

At the rate of ten to a compartment for six passengers, they travelled for two and a half days, four men a side squashed into seats for three, and two in the luggage racks overhead. There was no ventilation, just a fixed window and the sliding doors into the corridor, crowded with more prisoners camped down shoulder to shoulder, hugging their knees. Two armed guards kept vigil over the carriage doors at each end of the coach.

More disturbing to Beamont than the oppressive fug mingled with the stench of vomit from those who could not help being sick, was the fact that they were travelling by day. It had been the pride of his Tempest wing that they had helped the Tactical Air Force achieve a position where not one German train dare show itself in daylight. The troop train which had brought about his own downfall had been the first exception in weeks.

The thought was not a happy one, and the monotonous panorama sliding past the window, of charred and twisted skeletons of trains, flak trucks, and road vehicles, did nothing to ease his feelings. He knew at first hand how wide an area was covered by the daily interdiction sorties, and how the crawling caterpillar of smoke betrayed the presence of the train for miles around. It was impossible to hope that they could succeed in escaping the attentions of the train-busters; and though he supposed that there was an ironic sense of poetic justice in his being on the other end of the attack, he would glady have done without the intimate knowledge of its pattern and effects. There was unlikely to be any warning.

The first plane, at least, would be on them, sweeping down from 500 feet, pouring its rocket and cannon into them before it was detected. The pilot would know the exhilaration of the dive, the satisfying sight of his strikes spluttering into the train, squibbing and exploding with flashes and flame and belches of smoke; and they, the passengers, would know nothing until the blasting impact of that lethal storm of shrapnel hail, noise, heat and acrid smoke. Perhaps, thought Beamont, it might be a mercy to be in the path of the rockets on the first attack, and go out at once without consciousness of what was happening.

For after that, it would be panic and pandemonium, a terrible business in that overcrowded coach trying to get down the corridor and out of the only two doors before successive attacks trapped them in the inferno. Only a bare handful would ever make it, and certainly no one from Beamont's compartment in the middle of the coach.

Whilst day passed into night and into day again, and travel weariness and lack of proper air and sleep brought increasing discomfort. Beamont's spirits rose with the lessening of nervous tension as each day took them further into Germany and further away from the likelihood of providing another 'rhubarb' for a fighter sortie.

The freshness of the air as they marched up the sandy road from Sagen station through the pine woods was like an antiseptic swab. They came upon the camp suddenly. A double row of tall posts linked by a mesh of barbed wire, like a cattle corral, ran as far as the eye could see. At first glimpse the men did not associate it with themselves personally, but then the pygmy huts on stilts at two hundred yards intervals took on greater detail, and the ominous silhouette of guard and machine-gun brought realization of the true significance of the wire.

Nevertheless, it was good to be amongst his own sort again, sharing a companionship that bred confidence and reassurance.

The barrage of questioning to which he was subjected about the likely date for the end of the war, reaffirmed his own belief that his imprisonment would not be for long. There were sceptics, of course, the dismal Jeremiahs into whose souls the years of captivity had seared the iron of pessimism. Realists, they called themselves, in their excuse for delight in undermining hopes, and in justification for the avidity with which they hoarded and scrounged.

To Beamont the existence of this section of realists, small though the percentage might be, came as an unexpected shock. Squadron life—and never more so than in the days of adversity in France in 1940—had brought closer an understanding of the brotherhood of man. There was a bond of fellowship, forged out of fire, tempered by adventure and fear, and the intimacy of kindred spirits sharing the same experiences. Whatever one had, was available for those who were without. They lived as a true community with the sense of personal possession belittled by daily nearness to death.

It had never occurred to Beamont that life in a prisoner-of-war camp would be otherwise. It was easy, perhaps, for him as a new kriegie seeing out the last months of the war, to be critical, and hard to judge how his own views might have been influenced by years of captivity without visible end. A Naval Air Observer, captured in 1941, expounded his outlook with honest candour.

'Look chum,' he said biting on the stem of a pipe as they strode briskly round the compound. 'I have been out of camp twice. Once I was away for three weeks and I would have been across to Sweden the next morning and home long ago if it hadn't been for my partner. Each time I was captured because the other chap let me down and I swore after that I'd have no part in the joint escape scheme or communal enterprises of any kind. When you pool resources or enter a combine your strength is no more than that of the weakest man.

'Well I'm not accepting the handicap. Why should I? Why should I sweat for months learning German, and then take along someone who hasn't bothered to learn a word and has to open his big mouth in English at the wrong moment? I take the trouble to keep fit so that I shall survive, not so that I can carry some fool who has let himself go to pieces. That's his look-out, not mine.

'Let's face it. Life here is down to the elementals. Whether you like it or not, it is a case of the survival of the fittest. Nobody is going to get me back in England except me. Nobody is going to see me through this captivity except me and my own efforts. When I was taken prisoner I made up my mind that there was just one thing left for me to do: survive and see this war through. That determination has kept me going and nothing will stand in the way of it.

'You are shocked, I know. You think it is dreadful that I have collected seven wrist watches off the blokes here. Maybe it is profiteering on their misfortunes. I don't know. I never think about it. If they like to stake their watches in the pontoon school, or trade them for a few chocolate bars or cigarettes that's their lookout. All I know is that these watches are part of my insurance that I do pull through. You mark my words, the war is not over for us by a long chalk. You don't think for one moment that the goons are going to leave us here to be released as soon as the Allies or the Russians move in, do you? Not ruddy likely. There is talk already that Hitler is going to have us sent to Berlin to try and stop the bombing, and also to have us on hand as hostages. Well at least I am prepared as I can be for whatever comes.'

He eyed Beamont with amusement. 'When I get back to England—and I will if anybody does—I may look out the old school tie and go back to being the little gentleman again, but until then I admit frankly my motto stays at "Muck you, Joe, so long as I'm all right".'

Beamont walked back thoughtfully to his hut. It was true. A realist would get back if anybody did, and that goal of return was without doubt the be-all and end-all of any prisoner's existence. Personally he was resolved to do everything possible to make sure he did survive—but short of stamping on the other fellow's back. Was he priggish to feel so disapproving of this ruthless self-interest? It spelt often the difference between success and defeat outside the wire. In commerce and industry there must be few, he supposed, who had achieved their ambition without profiting to some extent at the expense of others, gaining by their mistakes and misfortune. The parallel could be drawn; and yet. . . .

He turned into his barrack-room and a tin hurtled through the air towards him.

'Catch, Bee!' shouted Alec Ingle, who had taken over 609 Squadron from Beamont and was shot down two weeks later.

· Beamont looked at the tin in his hand, a two-ounce tin of Balkan Sobranie tobacco.

'I have had a parcel,' explained Ingle joyfully. 'My first parcel has arrived! After seventeen months, one week, and three days I have had a parcel. Look!' He displayed the wrappings excitedly. 'There were two tins of tobacco in it, and that one is yours.'

Beamont put the tin on Ingle's bed. 'Thanks, Alec. Thanks a lot, but I'm not going to take your tobacco. You keep it. You don't know when you'll get another parcel, and the way things are going, it would be at least a year before I could repay you.'

'Who's talking about repayment? For goodness sake put the tobacco in your pipe and smoke it.'

'I'll have a pipeful with you,' Beamont compromised, 'but I'm not taking the tin.'

Ingle turned on him. 'Don't be an ass. If you don't take the tin I'll throw the ruddy thing over the wire, and then I'll never forgive you for the waste.'

Hesitantly Beamont picked up the tobacco. 'Well, Alec, I—I—I don't know——'

'Oh, shut up, Bee!' said Ingle impatiently. 'Forget it.'

Life was far from being as bad as he had anticipated. For the first time in years Roland Beamont found himself free of all responsibility except attendance at *appel*, the daily roll call. For the rest he was free to do, or not to do, as he pleased, and he found himself quickly submerged in the timeless atmosphere of the camp and its round of sports, library, lectures, debates, study, music, concerts and plays.

And then, on January 29, the camp was evacuated in face of the Russian advance. Men with bundles and shoulder-rolls, men towing kit on primitive sledges, men in blanket coats and towels, head-shawls and balaclava helmets, men whose most uniform item was the empty pipe between the teeth, trailed in a long caterpillar across the German countryside. For six days they trudged and slithered through the snow, camping at night in farmyards where the temperature was seldom above zero. Finally two and a half days of nightmare journey, shut up in darkness in cattle trucks with no room for all to sit down at once, brought them to their new home, Luckenwalde.

CHAPTER XVII

LUCKENWALDE

LUCKENWALDE was a fester of neglect and decay. Nothing in his knowledge or imaginings matched the revolting squalor of 'this dark, evil-smelling pit', as Beamont wrote of the camp at that time. Broken windows and ill-fitting doors scarred the ramshackle huts into each of which close on two hundred men were crowded to sleep on three-tier bunks of planks and mildewed paliasses half-filled with lice-ridden straw. Over the walls damp had spread a fungus of sour grey patches, and there was no escape from the putrifying stench of the communal *abort* in the middle of the compound. Built above ground it had burst its sides and overflown. There was no sewage disposal, no heating, no cooking facilities. Within a week half the camp was down with gastro-enteritis and dysentery. And then there were no drugs, no foods to aid recovery.

In vain the British medical officers demanded opium, milk and cereals. The diet for all, sick and well, whom Hitler had moved close to Berlin to be on hand as potential hostages, comprised one-half litre of boiled barley soup, five potatoes, and a two-and-a-half inch slice of black bread. With no supplementary Red Cross parcels, the daily ration was 600 calories below the minimum necessary to sustain life.

The unappetizing monotony of the frugal diet mattered little. Meals were no longer a habit that gave satisfaction or pleasure. Eating was viewed strictly in terms of calory intake. Each man was his own dietician, conscious always of the starvation level, and mentally adding up the calorific value of every mouthful

Towards the end of March the arrival of Red Cross parcels softened the goad of semi-starvation, but even before that, the absence of food for the mind had been felt perhaps as keenly as physical hunger. Beamont, a self-sufficing individual asking no more than the companionship of a book, was seized with a restless urge for something to occupy his mind. If there was nothing to read, the next best thing was to write. He would keep a diary, he decided, and he sacrificed a bar of chocolate to buy a German field service writing pad from one of the guards.

Lying on his stomach on the bedboards, he chewed the stub of a pencil and stared at the ruled page. What was there to write about anyway in this God-forsaken hole where days and nights merged into weeks of eternal nothingness? This was as bad as facing the clean, ruled sheets of the examination paper for the School Certificate which had proved such a bugbear. And if he had not swotted his heart out with the aid of a crammer to fill those pages, he would no doubt never have been in Luckenwalde. Would that have been for the best? Probably not. He would have been called up for one of the Services anyway and his lot might have been worse. Assuredly he would never have found his element in any other sphere as he had done in the air.

No, Luckenwalde was a small price to pay for a war which to him had hitherto been pleasant enough. He had known the joy of flying and the satisfaction of success. At school both on playing fields and in classrooms he had always been one of the backers-up. It had taken the war to lift him out of the background, and give him a pride of achievement. In the squadron he had for the first time found a field in which he could leave his mark. Squadron life too had given him an understanding of the things for which he personally was fighting. Yes, he was fighting for King and Country, and home and family, but there was a limit to the rhetoric and fervour of propaganda that he could stomach. He waxed indignant at talk of a brave new world fit for heroes. How little politicians and administrators in reserved occupations knew of the fighting man, that they should attempt to bribe with spurious promises, and cheapen war which was inglorious enough in itself.

Beamont knew with surety that he was far from battling for a pipe-dream of a better world. Primarily of course he was operating under orders as an R.A.F. officer. It was as simple as that. You didn't have to think any further. But beneath the uniformed automaton that ranged the skies of Hampshire, Sussex, and Dorset in search of the Messerschmitts of the Battle of Britain, the tip-and-run Focke Wolfe 190s, and the robot flying bombs, was an inner conviction that he was waging war personally for the survival of things that mattered to him. The survival of a way of life that cherished the splash of rising trout in chalk streams, the piping of the redshank on the saltings, the first gleam of primroses in a Sussex wood, cool ale with cheese and pickles in an oak-beamed country pub. He had known the gratification of participating directly in the preservation of those things; and that was more than worth the price of a few months of Luckenwalde and what ever the fate of the uncertain future.

An hour passed and still the page stared blankly back at him. What was there of note about that morning in April, 1945? His gaze wandered absently round the dismal barrack hut and rested on a flight lieutenant lying on a bunk with his eyes closed and looking far from well. Gillet, he thought, one of the men who had escaped on the march from Sagen but had been recaptured. Well, there was no reason why the diary should start on that day exactly.

Beamont began to write:

> *1st week in April* . Of the seven people who escaped, seven have been recaptured and are back in the camp safe and well with the exception of Flight Lieutenant Gillet. He was captured by two S.S. Volksturmers, taken into a darkened room and brutally beaten up by eight S.S. men over a period of at least half an hour. He was beaten about the face with fists and revolver butts and kicked in the stomach repeatedly. All this although his identity as a British officer prisoner-of-war had been established without question. That was five days ago and he still looks grim. Our chivalrous enemy!

In spite of cramping and condensing his writing he had already filled threequarters of a page. If he were to give rein to all the things that happened and the rumours that were rife he would run through the '*Stenogramm-hest*' notepad in no time; and it was not going to be so easy to find more writing paper. Better, he decided, to keep the pad for logging new incidents as they occurred.

But the urge to write was still upon him. There was a poem he had first read in a magazine during his training days. The words had stayed with him and had run through his mind often to buoy him up in moods of depression and times of adversity. He turned to the other end of the notepad and wrote from memory the lines by John Gillespie Magee:

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split cloud,—and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of—wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air.

Up, up, the long delirious burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark or even eagle flew—
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.

He read them through with pleasure. They constituted so nearly his own testament as an airman. He wished he had written them himself.

It was as if the start of his diary put an end to weeks of monotonous uneventfulness in which men wearied of rumour. But then, two days later, rumour that the prisoners-of-war were to be moved, crystallized into fact and Beamont promptly made up his mind that he had not made such a good recovery after all from his gastro-enteritis.

> *April* 10. After weeks of better and better news, and of resigning ourselves to waiting for a few more weeks until final liberation, morale took a jolt last night with the information that the camp is to be moved to Munich on the

11th by cattle truck at sixty to a truck. This means travelling through the area of armed reconnaissance in front of the spearheads in the Leipzig and Nuremburg areas. That the Germans can be capable of such an intention at a time like this is typical of their mentality. If the train reaches Munich without being strafed by our fighters, it will be an amazing stroke of fortune (and I know well enough what 20-mm. can do to trains). However should this move come off my policy will be to try and stay behind with the sick. This is the allied target area—not Munich.

Two days ago we saw a Mosquito release a cloud of leaflets overhead at about 20,000 feet. Intelligence reports that the contents are telling Russian prisoners-of-war that they will be liberated within ten to fifteen days.

The Russians have been literally starved by the goons and are dying in dozens of T.B. The hospital is crammed with them. We had collections of food which we can hardly spare for them. Meanwhile great preparations of emergency food. Am fairly well off this time. One lives and learns. Over and above the Red Cross parcel I have acquired six chocolate bars, a tin of fish and three pounds of chocolate pemmican by judicious trading during the past weeks. So even without food from the Germans I should have nearly two weeks' food at a bare living rate. In addition I have just traded a blue sweater and a pair of Jack Sharkies for two boxes of prunes, value 2s. 6d. but two days food.

Midday. Germans announce officially that we move tomorrow. Have sent name in as unfit to travel—this is only partially true. But one risk is as good as another and I prefer this one as a far better chance of liberation.

April 11. We have informed the Germans that this move is being carried out entirely without our co-operation. The only possible reason must be that we are intended to be held as hostages in the last stronghold in the mountainous area of Munich.

3 *p.m. Thursday April* 12. After another night of tension, the camp was marched out to entrain for the incredible

journey through the battle area to Munich this morning. As a notable change from the normal practice the move took place to the endless accompaniment of '*bitte*' absolutely no '*Raus! Raus!*' at all.

Even more amazing, my scheme has come off. I have been left behind with the sick bods against all the advice of apparently well meaning older kriegies who were, I think suffering from a surfeit of sour grapes. This was the best chance, and now, not three hours after the main party had gone, comes the news that the Allies have cut the Magdeborg-Berlin autobahn. They could be here tomorrow.

The suspense is something of which I have never experienced the like. Waiting for a big low attack-show is a tea party in comparison! Atmosphere is electric.

The German officer on *appel* said, when I asked permission to remove a partition in a block for a new camp office: 'One does not start a new building at five to twelve.' At least they know the form.

The main party was still reported at the station, having spent the night in the trucks waiting for an engine which the Reichbahn people think is unlikely to materialize.

At 9.30 p.m. we received word that the boys were coming back as transport is impossible. Tank spearheads are reported at Brandenburg, Wittenburg—30 miles from here—North of Halle and Leipzig. We are directly in front of the three pronged thrust, and nothing short of fantastic ill-fortune can prevent our freedom in the next few days.

Saturday April 14. We worked late into last night trying to repair the damage in the blocks, caused by the departed kriegies themselves. In seven barracks there was hardly a serviceable bed. After appeals we received about fifteen per cent assistance in the big job of making sure that the returning boys would have at least a place to sleep. It is galling, the number of men who are not in the least concerned about the welfare of their friends and think only about themselves.

Still, somehow we arranged things and this morning the first party came in at 10 a.m., to the accompaniment of clapping and cheering from the Poles, and a loud chorus of 'Hey, hey the gang's all here!' from the Americans, accompanied by a trumpet, a violin and a mouth organ.

During yesterday's *appel* we held a two minutes' silence at attention in memory of Roosevelt who died yesterday. Particularly effective as Americans were not on *appel* at the time, and remarkable because the company of German guards who had paraded and were about to march off, remained at attention with us.

Reminder that Germans are still in control came last night when two R.A.F. N.C.O.s attempted to climb the wire at the eleventh hour. One attacked a sentry with a bottle and was shot and killed. The other wounded. Bloody fools.

April 15. Terrific raid on Berlin suburb about twelve miles north of here last night. Made London show seem quite insignificant. Incredible din and display. Patton has a security blackout on the drive across the Elbe at Magdeborg. It is fifty miles away and is heading straight for us. Groups of kriegies stand in the compound all day staring south-west.

The atmosphere has more than expectancy, however, as the *abort*, always unsavoury, has sprung a leak.

To-day's big tragedy—I sat on my pipe and broke it.

Monday 16. Tantalizing news that the camp at Magdeborg to which the remainder of Luft 3 were sent from Sagen, has been liberated intact! When will our turn come?

Tuesday 17. Another great Fortress raid passed over this morning. Mustangs and Thunderbolts are constantly in sight. Every thud and explosion, every flash of light in the sky is taken to be an indication of the advancing Americans.

Stalag IIA consisting of some 4,000 allied soldiers was evacuated into this area last week and, having arrived, had nowhere to go. They are living in the open, with no food supplies and no medical attention, and are in a tragic condition. The S.B.O. sent our last reserve of Red Cross parcels to them yesterday together with two doctors and drugs.

Four hundred Russian sick were suddenly taken from our camp yesterday for a destination unknown.

Wednesday 18. Day after day, rumours add to the tension. The Russians are advancing fifty miles to the east, the Allies forty miles to the west and south, but we are still here! The great optimism of the week-end has not borne fruit and now there is a new situation: no more Red Cross food.

Thursday April 19, *night*. The strain of boredom of the last few days was relieved at midnight when the Wing Commanders were routed out for a meeting with the S.B.O. His office was crammed with a circle of figures crouched round the table upon which lay a map of the area and two guttering lamps. He told us that the Russians had broken through south-east of us, were less than thirty miles away, and that the Germans proposed to march the whole camp unit of 4,000 prisoners of war in hostile country with no destination and no supplies of food or drugs, and most probably no shelter. The whole district is a battle area and such an action on the part of the goons cannot but have tragic results.

Friday 20, *morning*. Still no further action by the Germans. We have our remaining food stocks packed and ready. Whether we go or stay, there will be no more food in a week's time. With the possibility of freedom nearer than it has ever been, the chance of getting the chop is rather great. But to hell with the war! The only course is to relapse into one's normal state of mental rigidity and sunbathe.

Saturday 21. The most amazing day of my life. All night fires raged, guns thundered, and cannons shattered and at dawn a violent tank battle took place at Luckenwalde. Jutorborg, twelve miles to the south is in flames. F.W. 190s are ground-strafing within sight at all times. In short we are in the front line.

The writing on the wall could no longer be ignored. Luckenwalde was a no-man's-land under fire from enemy and allies alike. Russian shells were bursting round the camp, German aircraft were spasmodically strafing it. At night the flares of Bomber Command's Pathfinders blossomed overhead lighting up the silver grey globules of the rain of bombs that looked as if they must swamp the camp into obliteration, but at the last minute swept forward to their target in Potsdam. Night was shot with light, a false day born of countless flickers and flashes and flames which at the height of a raid merged for minutes on end into the steady brilliance of an awe-inspiring sunrise. A sunrise of fire and blood, shrieking with the clamour of hell and the din of destruction against which ten miles away the voice of man could not shout loud enough to make his companion hear. Stunned by the noise and the terrifiying spectacle of man-made inferno, the prisoners watched from the grandstand of Luckenwalde as the war mounted to its savage climax. That anyone or anything could survive the holocaust seemed doubtful, and joy at the vision of victory and freedom was tempered with sober uneasiness that the last days of the war might prove also the last days of themselves.

Uneasier still were the German guards, for the most part veterans whose age was a source of amusement to the prisoners. One guard who was asked what he had been doing in the 1914-18 war, replied with unconscious humour: 'Nothing, I was too old for the last war.'

Faced for a second time with the bitterness of defeat into which proud ambition had shrivelled, the guards went dejectedly about duties which they made no more than a pretence of performing. So long as there was a likelihood of the Allies reaching Luckenwalde—and the current joke was a remark attributed to the Commandant that if necessary the Germans would send transport to make sure that the British and Americans did arrive first—the probability was that the camp staff would stay put. But as the Russians began to forge ahead in the race for Berlin it became increasingly apparent that the guards had no intention of staying to surrender to the East. Against this contingency the S.B.O. drew up plans for his officers to take over the camp control and administration. To Beamont, with

Squadron Leader Gunning to assist him, fell the responsibility of the N.C.O.s' compound.

One by one the guards were deserting, and news that the Russians were well into the suburbs of Berlin was a signal for the final withdrawal. With dogfights overhead, and the rumble of artillery growing closer, the German Commandant summoned the S.B.O. and staff.

'Gentlemen,' he said tersely. 'It is our hope that the British will intercede with the Russians and ensure that the Germans receive the same chivalrous treatment that we have given to British prisoners-of-war.'

The S.B.O. smiled. 'We shall be delighted to see that you are treated as we have been,' he replied, but the German missed the point. Stiffly he clicked his heels, saluted and dismissed.

Before he had left the camp the swastika was hauled down and an Air Force ensign made out of a blue airman's shirt with strips of coloured material and hidden in readiness for the occasion, was run up the flagpole. By three o'clock all but half a dozen of the guards who had been thrown into gaol to await trial on charges of ill-treatment, had gone.

In the hiatus between the departing Germans and the establishment of the British organization, men intoxicated with the idea of freedom tore through the wire that had been the boundary of life and death, to collect arms and souvenirs. But although the Germans were fleeing before the onslaught and the Mayor of Luckenwalde was pleading in vain for the British prisoners to accept the surrender of the town, there were a few who had no intention of retreating.

Embedded in a hill overlooking the camp was a pocket of young S.S. troops pledged to fight until the end. Word reached them of the collection of arms and the Germans held captive; and their reaction was a salutary reminder that all was still far from well. Threatening to shoot hundreds of prisoners for every German or every gun, found subsequently in the camp, the S.S. demanded the immediate surrender of the guards and all the arms. There was no bluff in the threat of these men who had already dedicated themselves to death and had nothing to fear from future retribution. Sheepishly the kriegies released their captives and tossed their hours-old armoury into the the centre of the compound.

'All prisoners will remain within the wire,' snapped the S.S. officer. 'At the first sign of any movement beyond the wire we shall open fire without warning.'

Not only the threat of the S.S. bespoke the prudence of remaining inactive within the wire. Luckenwalde camp had become a sanctuary, a small unconquered plot of Germany detached from battle and the murder and arson rampant in the streets outside the gates. General Eisenhower, too, had spoken on the radio directing all prisoners of war to stay in their camps until the arrival of repatriation units.

The commonsense of the S.B.O.'s order that no one was allowed outside the wire was irrefutable, but in the N.C.O.s' compound it was received with mixed feelings. A small disruptive element had no wish to see reason. Mostly they were younger aircrew and soldiers who had spent much more time in captivity than on active service, and had long since forgotten their background of training and discipline. Since the day that they had been taken prisoner they had had no contact with officers. They had accustomed themselves to their own self sufficient existence: an existence which knew the privilege of being allowed outside the wire daily on the official working parties. Now in the first moment of freedom from their guards, it was easy to jump to the conclusion that the officers were rushing in to re-establish authority, with restrictions which the N.C.O.s had not even suffered under the Germans.

Resentment and a smouldering of rebellion murmured in the air when Beamont with Squadron Leader Gunning entered the N.C.O.s' stalag. Why, he wondered grimly to himself, did he out of fifteen hundred officers have to be picked for this duty? Inwardly he was torn by a conflict of emotions. It was all very well for him to be told in the 'flagship': 'Stand no nonsense. I'd break their hearts before they broke mine.' This was no R.A.F. station with adequate Service facilities for breaking the hearts of those who failed to observe the regulations to the letter. But in any case, against the infusion of the Uxbridge mentality which bristled at the slightest hesitation in unquestioning obedience to orders, Beamont was very conscious of his own brief sojourn as a prisoner. Although his natural inclination was to condemn out-of-hand departures from normal basic standards of behaviour, he was aware of a nagging conscience insisting that a few months' experience did not qualify him to judge the actions of men who had been prisoners for years.

Control had to be established, of course; but surely the means was to win it through the majority rather than to try and impose it peremptorily on the whole? The basis of discipline was confidence, and to win the confidence of a small unit of rational men, living under normal conditions, could take months as Beamont knew from his own experience of command. At all costs, Beamont decided, he must avoid incident which might further the influence of the inflammatory group in spreading resentment against the officers. This was no time for jumping heavily on the first sign of indiscipline.

He had the men on parade and addressed them. They listened sullenly without interest to the orders of the S.B.O., to the directive from General Eisenhower himself. All they wanted to hear was news: news of what was happening, news of when they were going home. There was no beating about the bush. Unless the administration did something for them, they would take matters into their own hands. The situation was as simple as that; but meanwhile the presence of the S.S. troops, still holding their position on the hillside, aided Beamont's plea for patience. Half-hearted attempts were made to repair some of the holes, and pickets were stationed along the wire.

Conscious that no more than a temporary state of uncertain compromise had been achieved, Beamont returned to his own quarters. His '*Stenogramm*' notebook had been filled, but he found some German invoice forms and took up his diary again on the back:

> We are in the most critical of all stages now. Nearly free but without news of relieving forces, and in this country of brutality and horror anything might happen yet.
>
> We know that the Russians are all round us. Perhaps they will be here tomorrow. I win £30 if they are. It is grand to have a job again. Quite a strange thing using a telephone!

> Hell! An F.W.190 has just strafed the whole length of the camp. I must go and see if there have been casualties.
>
> Midnight, and no casualties. The organization is almost complete. Amazingly enough the telephone network is operating and I have a set in my temporary office-cum-bedroom now. Very tired, have checked and arranged pickets on the wire of the N.C.O.s' compound.

In spite of his fatigue Beamont slept uneasily. Night was noise. Noise that was distant, and noise that was close. Noise that rose and fell, dying only to surge forward and pound him with increased ferocity. Night was a sky quivering with the drone of aircraft engines and an earth shuddering with the crump of blockbusting bombs. Night was a background thunder of heavy artillery, pierced by the whistle of shells and the stacatto stutter of machine-guns. Lashed by the sharp report of anti-aircraft fire and the intermittent snap of rifle and revolver, night was a concentration of every Guy Fawkes's day he had known.

Either your name was on the shell or it wasn't. That's all there was to it; but you accepted the fatalism much more gladly if you were in there, diving and banking with the control column under your hands, and rocket and cannon on call in the wings.

At five o'clock on the Sunday morning a new disturbance, a tumult and commotion within the camp itself, jerked him fully awake and out of his bunk. Manned partly by girl soldiers, a Russian armoured car had fought its way into the camp, and an interpreter was triumphantly informing a crowd of joyfully hysterical kriegies that they were free.

'Free!' she reiterated. 'You all come to Berlin and we fight the enemy together. Hurray!'

What the prisoners were to fight with, and how they were to get to Berlin through armed Germans who were still resisting desperately outside the gates, was not quite clear.

'If anyone wants to go,' announced the S.B.O., 'I cannot stop him. But I do suggest you obey General Eisenhower's orders and stay put.'

Within hours Russian tanks and infantry had followed up the arrival of the armoured car, and two tanks took time off from the battle in the street to plough down stretches of the wire as visual demonstration to the prisoners that they were indeed free. The heartiness of the Russians cooled, however, when there was no rush to mass suicide on the pretext of fighting armed Germans with bare fists and promises of rifles as soon as they reached Berlin.

In his makeshift diary Beamont scribbled:

> *Sunday April 22, midday.* Russians here in force. Fighting all round. Local tank commander's attitude very brusque and dogmatic. I don't think they like us very much. Tanks charging up and down have torn up our communications and in places the wire. The French are hysterical, the British a little less so, and the Norwegians are calm. The Americans are reported only a few miles away. I hope they get here before this comedy becomes a tragedy.
>
> At long last the Red Air Force's close support Aira-Cobras, Yaks, and Stormoviks fly above us. So do the Luftwaffe, putting up a brave show to the last. It was fascinating to watch a silver dart of an Me. delta jet dive straight down on to a formation of forty Fortresses, then 'bang! bang!' and a Fortress fell away whilst the Me.163 shot straight up into cloud.
>
> In another scrap two Me.109s shot down three out of twelve Aira-Cobras without loss. The Aira-Cobras were flying in formation under cloud. I caught a glimpse of the 109s as they dived straight astern, shot down two of the Cobras, and whipped up into cloud leaving the rest of the formation running round in circles wondering what had happened. Further on the Me.109s came down again through another hole in the cloud and destroyed the third Aira-Cobra. They suffered no loss themselves.
>
> 1 *p.m.* The Russians depart leaving us in temporary control. They have brought up a quantity of flak already, so it seems as if the area is nearly stabilized. However there are still plenty of bangs, and plenty of great unneighbourliness in this area.
>
> The news announces tanks penetrating deep into Berlin.
>
> *Evening.* Violent fighting in the woods to the north. Shells whistling and screaming overhead, and 190s dive-bombing

> the autobahn. The Russians have added heavy flak to their set-up here. The din is fantastic. More fierce fighting on the boundaries and cannon-strafing by Junkers 88s. Two Serbs and a number of Russians killed in the fighting round the camp. Violent action between a Russian tank and Germans as it left the main gate. The Russians seemed to win. They have taken General Ruge with them to fly him to Moscow. This leaves the S.B.O. as the senior allied C.O.

The arrival of the Russians had brought excitement and hope, but it had also brought increasing complications to the British day-old defence scheme of organization and control. Wire which had kept prisoners within camp, had served a dual purpose of keeping others out. Now the breaches that the Russian Tanks had exuberantly torn in the wire, made it not only difficult to keep check on the prisoners-of-war, but were an open invitation to the swarms of refugees and displaced persons drawn by the sight of the Union Jack. British residents, tourists trapped in 1939, wives of Germans, people without home and country, people of all nationalities and of none, people in fear: in fear of the Russians, in fear of the Germans, in fear of war. In hundreds and thousands the endless stream sought sanctuary of the British in Luckenwalde.

Instead of gaining their long awaited freedom, British officers found themselves transformed suddenly into a vast relief organization, administrating a camp that was to grow to between 17,000 and 18,000 persons of all nationalities amongst whom were women and babies. An Interrogation Centre guarded against the entry into the camp of German nationals and undesirables. Four large kitchens were set up to ensure the fair distribution of what food there was. A 'Works and Building' Section, staffed entirely by British officers, carried out the essential services of power, water supply, sanitation and refuse disposal.

But Beamont personally was too preoccupied with the situation in the N.C.O.s' compound to worry about the problem of the refugees. Prisoners had been told by the Russians that they were free, and free they wanted to be. Free and away from Luckenwalde before the Germans staged a rally. Free too, in a few cases, to share in what plunder and vicarious pleasures that were to be had in the battle-ravaged town where law and order were non-existent.

In a sense of duty Beamont had arranged a picket rota, but he knew it was just a front. The guards would let their pals through, and in any case, to try to stop anyone would be asking for trouble.

The summons after midnight came as no surprise. An officer had tried to arrest a man who was cutting the wire, and was promptly threatened by a group of long term 'kriegies'.

To his diary Beamont confided:

> Told officers and pickets to dissuade the men from going through the wire if possible, but if told to 'b——— off', to 'b——— off' promptly and avoid incident. Then talked to to the chaps in the blocks and reported to the S.B.O. Suggested that all compounds should be open, giving free circulation throughout the whole camp but within the wire. Bed at 2.30 a.m. Strafed by a Ju.88 at 4 a.m. Cannon shells all over the shop but fortunately no casualties.
>
> 8 *a.m.* Another direct threat to officers. Three sections of the wire cut away and Army N.C.O.s loose. The R.A.F. hanging fire though pretending to follow Army lead. Walked into each barrack and addressed the men. Think I put the position over and am more certain than ever the trouble is due to just one or two bad characters. At one point nearly used the S.B.O.'s authority to throw the worst types into the cooler, but steered clear. Am sure freedom of circulation within the whole camp would ease the situation.
>
> This is the worst couple of days in my experience without exception. The feeling of the possibility that we might lose control of a mass of desperate men, under conditions of front-line war and artillery shells, machine-guns, rifles, aircraft cannon and bombs going off all round, is inclined to be unpleasant. I think we can hold our own, but it is not a comfortable position.
>
> Russians killed off four German wounded hiding in the woods. Nice people!
>
> Stormoviks and Yaks in great numbers to-day. They seem to operate well on their side of the front! Dog fights

> between four Aira-Cobras and one Me.109 overhead this afternoon. The Russians seem to weave violently at all times. The Yak is a good little fighter in the Spitfire class.
>
> Our pet Junkers 88 low strafed us with front guns again in the moonlight. Plenty return 20-mm. fire from the town. Very interesting to be at the other end for a change. I admire these Luftwaffe boys for carrying on to the grim end.
>
> A Russian patrol found four French P.O.W.s in a house outside the camp with some women. Russians shot and killed the Frenchmen for refusing to obey an order. They probably wanted the women for themselves.

The relaxed restrictions which Beamont had advocated, giving freedom to all prisoners throughout the camp, averted further disaster, and he continued his diary:

> Our own trouble has died down for the moment. We have averted a riot I suppose, but in actual practice discipline as such is gone.
>
> *Wednesday*. Still no Americans. This waiting is tricky. Plenty of food now when at odd moments I can find time to eat. Yesterday I had my first hot drink and a meal of bread and rhubarb at 3.30 p.m. The Russians are giving us everything they can. Very friendly now and much back slapping, but no respect.
>
> *Thursday*. Situation tense again in my compound. N.C.O.s are not the slightest bit prepared to meet the officers half way, and are quite certain that we are there to make life unpleasant.
>
> In all this turmoil the thought that we are no longer in fact prisoners-of-war and should be home soon is difficult to grasp and is not in the least exciting.
>
> *Saturday*. So ends this demoralizing week of passing on and handing out orders that one knows perfectly will not be carried out. Held a roll parade to check ration strength this morning. The men even took a lot of persuasion and

diplomacy to turn out for that. Last night the news of a link-up between Americans and Russians at Torgau cheered everyone immensely. The later report that a jeep bearing three American war correspondents had been seen on the way to Berlin should do much to settle the present unrest.. Watched a Mig shoot down a 190 in four short bursts. Very pretty.

Wednesday. Ten days since the Germans left. One of the biggest battles we have seen is now raging on the north-east and northern borders of the camp. Rifle and tommy-gun fire is incessant and a light artillery and mortar duel is in progress with us in no-man's land. The radio has announced the release of all camps taken by the Americans or British, but has said nothing of us. Our people must be worried. So are we.

Thursday. 1800 *hours*. The first Yanks in the camp. Two war correspondents in a jeep from the lines at Magdeborg. They are taking Beatty, our press correspondent, back with them tomorrow and he will fly to Eisenhower's headquarters with our records. Maybe things will start moving. All the boys want to push off west and are doing so in increasing numbers. I would be right with them if I hadn't this damned responsibility. Wrote a brief note home and put it in the jeep. It might get through

Friday. Sunshine. Many more people walking west. Two hundred of the men from this compound alone walked out yesterday. The position is intolerable. We can and should march the camp west to the Elbe with of course the Russians approval. The Americans are at Wittenborg. Only twenty-five miles away—one day or so on a bicycle.

1600 *hours*. American Colonel from Davescourt headquarters here, said our evacuation starts at once! Trucks arriving to-night and we shall be flown home. Can it be true! Shall we, shall I be out of this country of death and home in England? It is almost too much to expect.

It was too much to expect. Hopes were raised and dashed.

That evening Beamont scribbled bitterly the last entry in his diary:

> *Friday.* The trucks arrived and were sent away by the Russians.

After so many rumours had squibbled feebly and petered out in the dampness of repeated disillusion, it was uncanny how on that particular May morning the by-now hackneyed whisper that the 'Yanks were coming' gained hold on the camp. Some mystical sense of jungle telegraphy gave conviction to rumour and had most of the kriegies out in the open, staring for hours towards the West.

This time there was no mistake. The jeep, emblazoned with the Stars and Stripes, was no mirage. Followed by a line of open trucks, it drew up at Luckenwalde.

But though they had for so long looked and hoped and expected it, the sight of the trucks, now they were in front of the eyes, was still unbelievable. Men stared incredulously, silently, robbed of speech.

'O.K., boys, relax!' shouted an American colonel cheerily. 'We're a forward repatriation unit. We've come to evacuate you boys. You're going home!'

It needed those words to turn trance into reality, to loosen constricted throats and let the gathering of cheers and shouts escape. Men danced joyfully, men turned aside to check an uprush of emotion, men raced to their quarters to gather their few belongings.

The S.B.O. introduced himself. 'I presume you will take American nationals first,' he suggested.

'No, sir,' retorted the colonel. 'No discrimination. I'm taking the lot.'

Like the first breath of chill on a summer evening an awareness that something was wrong crept over the excitement. Kriegies returned with their bundles to find that the Russian machine-guns, set up in defence against the Germans, had been trained on the repatriation trucks. The S.B.O. and American colonel were arguing vehemently with a Russian officer.

'The prisoners-of-war are in Russian protective custody,' he declared stubbornly. 'There is no authority for their release. They remain here until it is received.'

'They do nothing of the sort,' stormed the U.S. colonel. 'I have my orders, and my orders are to repatriate these men. I am not leaving here without them.'

The set, sullen expression on the face of the Russian did not change as he issued his ultimatum. 'The trucks will be shot-up if they have not been removed within half an hour.'

Angrily the American stamped away with the S.B.O. 'The sonfabitch, the sonofabitch!' he growled. 'If I——let me——' He glanced at the assembled prisoners-of-war, men in their hundreds whose gaze never left him as they waited in an anxiety sick with dying hope.

'Hell!' he exploded. 'We won't let them get away with it. I've got guns. If your boys like to risk it, I will too. We'll blast our way through.'

The S.B.O. gestured at the ring of machine-guns. 'There would be an absolute massacre. It's out of the question.'

Reluctantly the colonel admitted the obvious. 'I guess so. Well, don't you boys worry. We'll be right back. I'll take this up with Eisenhower personally. We'll have you out of here in no time.'

The truck drivers climbed into their cabins, and a shout of horrified disbelief broke from one of the prisoners. 'They're going! They're going to go without us!'

Half a dozen men dashed madly for the trucks. At once the Russian officer snapped an order, and a machine gun fired into the air above their heads. Uncertainly the men stopped and fell back.

In silence the kriegies watched the drivers start their engines, and move off. Back to the West of home and freedom headed the unit of empty trucks, leaving behind a desolation of forsaken hope and wretchedness.

Victory in Europe had been won. A week had passed since the German High Command signed terms of unconditional surrender. The men of Luckenwalde were no longer prisoners-of-war. They were prisoners of circumstance; and that was fifty times worse.

CHAPTER XVIII

PRISONER OF CIRCUMSTANCE

PRETENCE no longer marked the role of the Russians. Protective custodians they might be in international parlance, but custody was now openly the operative word. Luckenwalde was a prison camp again, shrouded in an atmosphere of menace and hostile suspicion. Morale sank to new depths that offered an easy spawning ground for the rumours of Siberia which the attitude of their new-found jailers did nothing to allay.

The customary barrack-room plaint of 'But they can't do it!' went unsung. No one believed that there were any limits to the practice of this strange, ruthless creed which counted for nought even the lives of its own kin. The only thing of which the kriegies could be certain was that the Russians had no bluff to call.

There had been evidence enough of the contempt for life which this Red Army administrative unit practised. Attempts, for instance, by the British to revive from their own sparse rations the Russian prisoners whom the Germans had starved almost to death, had been to no purpose. On arrival the Red Army unit had shot without hesitation those of its own nationals in the camp who had been too weak to carry arms and be rushed to Berlin.

When a British medical party tried to carry back to camp hospital a young Hitler Youth shot through the knee cap, they were stopped by a Russian jeep.

'What are you doing?' demanded a woman officer.

They explained. Immediately the woman pulled the German's head up by the hair, and her male partner with an efficiency that suggested an oft-practised double routine, shot the youth neatly through the temple.

High-handed and ruthless the Russians might be, but their methods solved at once some of the problems that had faced the camp's defence organization. There was now less desire to break camp since the Russian colonel had opened fire in warning above the heads of those who had attempted to do so.

The problem of food was settled with an equal simplicity and directness. 'Do as we do,' retorted the colonel when the S.B.O. raised the question. 'Live on the country. Go out and get cattle and whatever you want.'

The confinement order was lifted to the extent of allowing out official foraging parties under a Russian guard who proved an asset rather than a hindrance. There was no bargaining, no terms. His revolver was sufficient inducement to the Germans to hand over whatever the British required.

But the same persuasion with the gun was being used in camp to take from the prisoners any possessions that the Russians fancied. The German guards had left the 'kriegies' their watches, but now the Russian soldiers began removing these at pistol point. And sheltering all their actions was the strange new crime of insult to the Red Flag. Any questioning of their actions, any complaints, were liable to be interpreted as an insult to the Red Flag carrying punishment up to the extreme penalty.

When complaints about the removal of the watches were made to the Russian commandant, he immediately refuted them and in his turn complained of the insult to the Red Flag that such allegations inferred.

The S.B.O. hesitated. He had proof enough but quite obviously it would never be investigated. He would be in jail first, on that convenient pretext of continuing to insult the Red Flag.

Fortunately at that moment, a commotion attracted their attention. A Russian soldier was crossing the compound followed by a kriegie yelling, 'The bastard's pinched my watch!'

Taking a chance the S.B.O. suggested that there was a case in front of their eyes that might be investigated.

Angrily the colonel summoned the soldier, who emphatically denied taking the watch.

'You see,' snorted the colonel. 'These insults to the Red Flag! They will cease. I have warned you——'

'It's in his right hand pocket, sir,' said the kriegie, 'and it has my initials on the back.'

'May he be searched?' suggested the S.B.O.

The Russian commandant hesitated. For a moment he seemed on the point of arresting the S.B.O. there and then, but perhaps he realized that the affair was too public and had gone far enough.

'Very well,' he snapped. 'But if he has not the watch—I have warned you! Search him.'

Fear grew on the soldier's face. With great agitation he repeated his denials, but the colonel silenced him imperiously. The search proceeded and a watch was produced. Frantically the soldier made a last attempt to deny that the watch belong to the kriegie, but not even the colonel could escape the evidence of the initials.

Sentence was summary, and it needed no knowledge of Russian to realize that the soldier had been condemned to death.

In silence the watch was returned to its owner who took it uneasily, his face ashen as if it were he himself who had murdered the man. 'I—I—only wanted my watch back,' he gulped, as the thief was led away under guard.

The S.B.O. found his voice. 'Surely for theft, the sentence is a bit harsh,' he ventured.

'The man is not being shot for theft,' corrected the colonel coldly. 'He is to be executed for disgracing the Red Flag.'

As a sop to the restlessness of the prisoners-of-war and a supposedly practical reassurance of the steps the Russians were taking to arrange repatriation, identification parades became the order of the day. For hours on end prisoners stood around whilst Russians with a bare smattering of English sought vainly to write down the men's names, ranks, and numbers.

But whilst this hollow mockery of formalities added another goad to impatience and despair, the American colonel in charge of the forward repatriation unit had been as good as his word. For, presumably as a result of direct representation by General Eisenhower, on May 21, a convoy of Russian trucks drove into the camp.

Identification parades and the stacks of forms and incomplete registers were forgotten. Without explanation or formality the prisoners-of-war were loaded into the trucks and driven out of the gates.

Death spread her pattern everywhere during the six hour drive through dusty, sandy, country with hills of conifers breaking the skyline. Every road had been bitterly contested. Foxholes and broken trees and twisted bodies made each crossroads a uniform memorial of a last stand unto death. One village had died horizontally, knocked down by guns and crawled over by the caterpillar tracks of tanks. Another had met death from the air, pockmarked into a swamp of obliteration by an attack intended for the unscathed railway siding close by.

Those who had died first had received the benefit of hasty, incomplete burial: molehill mounds with protruding arms and legs that betrayed their nature. But in the last wave death had outpaced human decencies and men lay as they had fallen, broiling under the hot sun and warming the air with death's oppressive, earthy bouquet.

Overshadowing the joy of returning to long awaited freedom, the atmosphere of the straggling, sprawling grave stifled exuberance, and men travelled in unnatural silence, quietly thankful, as if they themselves were passing from death back to life. It was all so different from what they had imagined. No loud excitement and raucous celebration, no cheers and flag-wagging and unrestrained abandon giving relief to the pent-up emotions of the past months and years.

On the Russian-held banks of the Elbe they dismounted and free at last of captors and guards, walked once again as individuals across the bridge of no-man's-land from the restricted past to the unconfined future.

Still there was no noise, no hurrahs, no barrage of questions and congratulations, no thrilling welcome. Quietly they were received by the Americans, bundled into fresh trucks and driven to Halle aerodrome where they were allotted rooms in a former Luftwaffe barrack. In the vast dining-hall they sat down to coffee that no longer tasted of acorns, and pounds of butter and angel cake which they could not eat.

Return to England four days later in a Lancaster provided the same curious, disappointing experience. They could not escape a feeling of arriving too late. They were an anti-climax. Peace celebrations had long been finished and the war was being quickly forgotten. Life was back to normal. Their clothes stamped them no longer as returning heroes or released prisoners-of-war, but simply as men in rags.

PART THREE

TEST PILOT

CHAPTER XIX

PILOT OUT OF UNIFORM

At Chilbolton Beamont formed the first wing of Tempest IIs for Tiger Force, but the sudden end of the Japanese war stayed their departure for the Far East. Instead in the new 'R.B.', Beamont led the Tempest formation in the Battle of Britain fly-past over London. Like an epilogue the anniversary celebrations emphasized that the war was at an end. A new volume had to begin. Beamont for the first time was confronted with the problem of the future, a future which entailed the support of a wife and two children. For the personal price of captivity had been the loss of the prospective job with Hawker's.

'I'm sorry, Bee,' Philip Lucas said. 'When we heard you were missing, we had to appoint someone else, and there is no opening on the experimental side now. You can have a job on production testing if you would like that. If not I'll enquire and see if I can find anything for you elsewhere in the Group.'

The filling of the vacancy was understandable, Beamont had to admit, and althought he had expected the verdict, he had hoped against hope during his months as a prisoner-of-war, that his return might not be too late. The chance of experimental research flying, the most stimulating and fascinating field of aviation with its rewarding satisfaction of pioneer development and creation, progress and achievement, seemed to have passed him by. His thoughts had to turn from preference to essentials: a job that included flying in some form. Playing safe he sent in his application for a permanent commission.

Weeks passed with no news. He was appointed to the command of the Air Fighting Development Squadron at the Central Fighter Establishment. Life was pleasing and mellow, and the enthusiasm with which new fighter tactics were devised and developed, lacked nothing because the venom of immediate purpose had been withdrawn. At heart Beamont was still a man of peace, a fisherman, a yachtsman, a bird-watcher; a man who could all the more enjoy the perfection of flight in the technique of combat manœuvres, because camera gun had replaced cannon as the weapons.

There was a timelessness about that Indian Summer of his Service career; and then with unwonted haste, the end of the year and his approaching Class 'A' release date was upon him. Beyond the opinion from Group that he stood as good a chance as anybody of obtaining a permanent commission, he could obtain no definite information about his application. Meanwhile Lucas had obtained for him the offer of a post with Gloster's as Number 3 test pilot. He decided to accept. Six weeks later the letter informing him of his selection for a permanent commission arrived.

Beamont discussed the position with his wife. A permanent commission offered security and a pension on retirement. Financially, too, with allowances and emoluments the commission was more attractive. But although the appointment at Gloster's was not what he really wanted, it was a foothold in the profession. It could lead to the type of research flying on which he had set his heart since Philip Lucas first mooted the offer of such a job in October,

Pat Beamont made no attempt to influence her husband either way. It was for him to make the decision, and so long as he was going to be happy, whatever he chose, she would be content. Her outlook was sane and simple. She had no patience with the almost unwholesome public desire to wrap test flying up in a veil of drama, beneath which the pilot's wife was always pictured waiting anxiously with pathetic bravery. In the first place who was supposed to look after the children, do the shopping, and run the house whilst she waited and wondered? And in any case the whole idea was nonsense. If wives had cause to worry it was during the war when their husbands were away in action on land, in the air, and on the sea. But then the risk they indirectly shared had been accepted and taken in the stride, and not nourished into an obsession that overshadowed everyday life.

To all prone to exclaim, 'How worrying your husband's job must be to you,' Pat Beamont had one answer: 'It isn't when you think of the war.'

Being a test pilot's wife was to her to mean a sharing of work that often went excitingly beyond the confines of humdrum daily routine, and offered the fascination of constantly discovering something new. It brought a pride in her husband's achievements, and in the fact that his skill, judgment, and courage were providing a national contribution that only a very few other men were in the privileged position of making.

Pat Beamont knew without words what the fate of the permanent commission would be, although a sense of responsibility prompted Beamont to enquire what duty he could expect if he accepted it. If there were a chance of joining the R.A.F. flight testing establishment at Farnborough or Boscombe Down for instance, that would put a different complexion on the matter.

He spoke to Air Marshal Sir Roderick Hill who was sympapathetic and advised him to see Air Marshal Sir James Robb, C.-in-C. Fighter Command. That meeting was not encouraging.

'What need is there for advice?' demanded the Commander-in-Chief. 'If you have been offered a permanent commission, take it.'

'My problem is, sir, that I have done a fair amount of test flying and believe I still have a contribution to make in that direction.'

'How many years' active flying have you done?'

'Seven, sir.'

'In that case, Beamont, you can expect the next seven years on administrative duties, can't you? That would be a fair balance.'

Beamont waited, but there was no doubt. Sir James Robb was in earnest. 'Thank you, sir,' he said at last. 'That is what I wanted your advice about. That is what I was afraid of.'

Dismissing him, Robb turned back to his papers, but looked up again as Beamont reached the door.

'I'm prepared to make one concession,' he said. 'Before you start your 'balanced career' I will post you to the High Speed Flight under Donaldson.'

The sop was inviting but not enough. Before he had shut the door of Robb's office he had made up his mind. He would have to contain his impatience and mark time at Gloster's until he found the opportunity he wanted.

Although he had rejected the chance of being a member of the High Speed Flight, Beamont was already closely concerned with preparations for the 1946 record. Before an aircraft leaves the factory it is automatically tested by the manufacturers' pilots to speeds in excess—to allow a safety margin—of the maximum requirements of the Service. When the R.A.F. decided to make a world speed record attempt in a Meteor, it fell therefore to Gloster's to see that the aircraft was first exhaustively tested to the Air Force requirement: a performance that would allow the existing record to be raised from 608 to 630 m.p.h., the target of the High Speed Flight.

In all Beamont carried out a series of thirty experimental test flights on the speed record aircraft, and ended with a number of timed, but unofficial runs, both at Boscombe and over the Severn. On July 9, in the culminating high speed trial of four runs over the Severn, with beneficial air temperature of 27 degrees centigrade, he reached a speed of 632 m.p.h. The Meteor had been satisfactorily tested to the maximum requirement and was ready for the High Speed Flight.

Release two days later of the official announcement of the creation of the Royal Air Force High Speed Flight manned by serving officers who alone would be permitted to attack the world record, drew considerable comment. It seemed to many ridiculous that the R.A.F. world record bid should be made possible only by the aircraft industry's own pilots, who had first to test the machine at comparable, or better, speeds, but were debarred from winning official recognition for their skill and courage.

To clarify the position, the Gloster Aircraft Company issued the statement:

> We are delivering Gloster Meteor IVs to the R.A.F. for special work in connexion with the high speed flight. All aircraft which pass out from the Gloster works are tested by our pilots up to the maximum speed the R.A.F. would expect them to do. Our senior experimental pilot, Wing Commander R. P. Beamont, D.S.O.,

> D.F.C., has flown the Meteor at speeds exceeding the world record. We are not able to run our own attempt as all our aircraft are under the control of the Ministry of Supply.'

Before Group Captain E. C. Donaldson raised the record officially to 616 m.p.h., after encountering much difficulty with adverse weather, Beamont left Gloster's. The main drawback to his position there was lack of prospective promotion and the absence of any new project to capture his interest. He had written to English Electric as soon as he heard that they were building the first British jet bomber, but when time passed without news he accepted the offer of a vacancy as a demonstration pilot at de Havilland's. Once in that company he was confident that he would be able to organize a transfer to the experimental side where the D.H.108 and some interesting military designs were being developed. He had been with de Havilland's only two months, however, when English Electric invited him to attend for interview for the post of chief test pilot.

CHAPTER XX

BIRTH OF THE CANBERRA

GLAMOUR is not a word to which the aircraft industry takes kindly, but with a garage basement in the heart of a city, and a remote deserted airfield, the setting for the birth of Britain's first jet bomber was colourful enough to satisfy the conceptions of any popular film producer.

As far back as 1911 the English Electric Company had built an aeroplane for military tests, and during the first world war they manufactured a wide range of machines including B.E. biplanes, torpedo-carrying seaplanes, and Sopwith Snipes. In 1923 they designed a light aircraft, the Wren, which won that year's light aircraft trials at Lympne; but subsequently the aeronautical side of their business lapsed until when, as a result of the Air Force expansion programme, they became a shadow factory. For five years the Company manufactured other people's aircraft—250 Hampdens, 3,000 Halifaxes, 1,100 Vampires—and it was natural that the thoughts of the chairman, Sir George Nelson, should turn to designing and producing an aircraft of their own.

The opportunity came in when Air Ministry issued a requirement for a medium bomber, powered by jet engines, for high altitude, radar bombing. Sir George Nelson decided to build. He engaged Mr. W. E. W. Petter, who had been responsible for the Westland Whirlwind twin-engine fighter, as his chief designer, and left him a free hand to appoint his own project team.

With the end of the war in sight, orders were falling away in hopes of a settled peace; and in some quarters there was a feeling that this was no time for the intrusion of a newcomer who ought to be sticking to his job of manufacturing heavy electrical plant and refrigerators. The advent of the newcomer was even less popular when the newly formed English Electric project team produced a design for a jet bomber with performance considerably in excess of the Air Ministry's requirements, and obtained an order

By the time Beamont was summoned for an interview to the English Electric's first design offices in Preston, the Canberra had reached the stage of a wooden mock-up. He arrived on a wet. dismal day in October, that did nothing to show off Preston's proverbial pride, but rather intensified the concentrated gloom of an industrial city. Nothing could less have inspired thoughts of flying than that drab side street of the address he had been given. Fortunately he had time in hand for he had walked the length of the street and was on his way back when outside a garage that he had already passed once, he noticed the inscription, 'English Electric Company, Ltd.' on the side of a van.

For a moment he was taken aback. Building an aircraft in a garage might be in the true pioneering tradition; but the whole setting was so different from that which his own experience of Hawker's, Gloster's and De Havilland's had led him to visualise as the birthplace of Britain's first jet bomber.

He found the office of the chief designer upstairs. Petter wasted little time on preliminaries but led him promptly to the basement. The air rang with the noise of men and machines at work, an insistent din trapped and multiplying in the low-roofed hollow built to shelter cars. Dominating the scene stood the big wooden mock-up, the full size replica of the bomber-to-be, looking larger than life in the comparatively confined space.

'There she is,' Petter announced, pitching his voice against the noise.

Together they walked round slowly, appraising her lines. Beamont stirred with excitement.

'What is the wing loading?' he asked.

Petter told him, and he nodded his satisfaction. Most pilots have some pet idea, usually about cockpit comfort, the position of the instruments, and the operation of flying controls. Beamont's particular tenet was low wing loading, the weight measured in pounds per square foot, that the aircraft wings had to lift.

In terms of flying, low wing-loading means greater manœuvrability, higher altitude, and more moderate landing and take-off speeds; and to Beamont it had long seemed that some of the advantages of the jet's superior power-to-weight ratio was being lost by the tendency, especially in the United States, towards ever-increasing heavier wing-loading. His enthusiasm bounded when he learnt that Petter held similar views on the value of low wing-loading as a basic principle of aircraft design.

Regaining the quiet of the office Petter discussed details of the project and the terms of the appointment as chief test pilot. It would be some months before they would be ready for a pilot. There was no aerodrome yet, let alone aircraft. The Company's aerodrome at Samlesbury was fully engaged in producing Vampires, and in any case that was to remain a distinct, separate department. As it was, Petter had found himself with a full design team and nowhere to house them until he had taken over that garage as a temporary headquarters.

Beamont returned to de Havilland's with the position left that he was to be notified definitely in due course; but from the way the interview had gone he had no qualms about the outcome. At the end of December the letter arrived offering him the post on the terms he had asked.

Somewhat diffidently he discussed the offer with de Havilland's chief test pilot, John Cunningham.

'What's the trouble?' Cunningham asked directly. 'Money?'

Beamont shook his head. 'No, it's the chance of experimental flying. I don't want to spend the rest of my life knocking back pink gins with customers and occasionally putting a Vampire through its paces for them. Frankly I took the job of business demonstration pilot with the hope that I could switch over later to join you and Geoffrey de Havilland on the experimental side.'

'All right, wait a day or two, Bee,' Cunningham suggested, 'and I'll see what can be arranged.'

A week later he delivered the verdict. 'I'm sorry, Bee, but you are employed on the business side and that's all there is to it. They won't hear of letting you transfer to this section.'

In May Beamont reported for duty with the English Electric Company, a test pilot without aircraft or airfield, his cockpit an office over the Preston garage. Though he kept his hand in flying Vampires on production flights at Samlesbury most of the first three months was spent living with, and absorbing every detail of this fore-runner of Britain's jet bombers. This, though his feet stayed on the ground, was the heart of experimental flying: watching the abstruse formulæ of the aerodynamicists and the blueprints of the draughtsmen crystallize into expression as a spar, a wing section, a control; knowing as a musician knows the melody from reading a score, how the aircraft will perform because of the shape, because of the structure, because of the positioning of each individual component.

Confirmation of theory can come only in practice, however. There was no other jet bomber in existence to act as a yardstick, and in particular no guidance from previous experience to the problems of handling a heavy aircraft at very high speed above forty thousand feet.

Whilst he was with Gloster's Beamont had taken the Meteor IV through its early experimental programme, and he knew something of its high-altitude potentialities. He mentioned this to Petter and the loan of a Meteor IV was arranged through the Ministry of Supply for flight research at high altitude.

Meanwhile English Electric had taken over Warton, a deserted airfield which had been used during the war by the Americans as a maintenance unit. Two works' policemen were put on duty to guard the gate and the derelict hangar in which the Meteor was housed amonst the ghosts of the Fortresses, Lightnings, Mustangs, Liberators, and the vibrant memory of bustling noise and feverish activity to return them to front-line strength. There was no radio, no Flying Control. The watch tower was a silent monument, the windowless flight offices somnolent in their shrouds of cobweb, damp and dust.

For six months Beamont drove to the airfield with a ground crew of three—a foreman, an aircraft fitter, and engine fitter—to carry out inspections and service the Meteor. In solitude undisturbed by the companionable static and the patter of Flying Control in his earphones he took off for the frontiers of his new world high above forty thousand feet: a lonely realm cast with purple shadows from the sun glaring white and a sky midnight blue.

Month after month he explored time and again the effect of high altitude on the Meteor's handling qualities, the controls, manœuvrability, the climb and dive, acceleration, stability and the onset of compressibility troubles.

Valuable though it proved for altitude research, the Meteor IV was too small an aircraft, however, to give English Electric much practical benefit in preparation for flying the Canberra. No jet aircraft in the country at that time approached the size of the bomber under construction, and the only comparable aircraft in the world were America's B.47, B.48, and B.45, then in a state of flight development.

To provide preparatory experience in flying big jets, arrangements were therefore made through the Ministry of Supply for Beamont to go on a flight mission to the United States in May, Unfortunately, when he arrived two of the three aircraft which he had crossed the Atlantic to fly, the Boeing B.47 and the Martin B.48, were grounded.

Somewhat disconsolately he was waiting at Paterson Field for a flight in the B.45 when he was hailed by Mr. W. G. A. Perring, then Director of the Royal Aircraft Establishment, Farnborough, who was on a visit to the States.

'Hello, Bee,' he said. 'How are you getting on?'

'I'm not,' Beamont answered. 'It looks as though I'll get a flight in the B.45 but that's all.'

They discussed the position of jet aircraft development in the United States, and particularly North American Aviation's P.86, the new experimental swept-wing fighter which reports credited with supersonic speed.

'Now a crack at that,' said Beamont wistfully, 'would make the journey worth while.'

Perring smiled. 'Experience of swept-wing flying, is that it? All right, I am going to the Pentagon tomorrow and I'll see if it can be organized. There's no harm in trying.'

Within twenty-four hours the authority for the flight had arrived, and Beamont flew to Muroc airfield where the P.86 was based.

George Welsh, North American's chief project test pilot greeted him warmly. A lean, sandy coloured man in the early thirties with crew-cut hair and a deep lined forehead, he had a slow leisurely drawl and a quiet infectious grin that put Beamont at ease.

'So you want to do a trip in the P.86?' he said. 'Fine. It's fixed for first thing in the morning. Let's take a look at her.'

The appearance of the P.86 was little like Beamont's own conception of the slim, tapering, dart-like lines with which a supersonic aircraft would be endued. In contrast the P.86 was squat and stubby, with short, clipped wings that looked inadequate for lifting the heavy bullet-nosed fuselage.

'If the thing does fly faster than sound,' he thought to himself, 'It won't be a question of piercing but blasting its way through the so-called barrier.'

Welsh briefed him thoroughly on the aircraft's performance and limitations, and her flying characteristics. 'You'll notice that with the swept-back wing the ailerons are much more sensitive,' he said. 'The 86 has been flying up to thirty-five and thirty-six thousand feet, and we have dived it to mach 1·02. That won't interest you, though. If you do come up against compressibility effects you'll find a longtitudinal change of trim and a dropping of the wing, but she stays easy to control.

'You'll have to keep an eye on your fuel consumption. There won't be that much to spare. Now, you had better see the geography of the place before the light goes.'

In a Navion light aircraft Welsh flew Beamont around the aerodrome, showing him the perimeter and the three mile concrete runway, ending at the edge of Muroc's dry greyish salt lake which provided a natural landing strip for another four miles in case of emergency.

Back at the flight test offices Beamont met some of the North American pilots who had no inhibitions about extolling the virtues of the P.86 and its supersonic capabilities, and gently ribbing the 'limey' pilot in the process about a world unknown to the British of flight faster than sound. Not for a moment did they imagine he would take their remarks as a challenge, and in fact Beamont suffered the leg-pulling good humouredly without any real intention of doing so.

At that time, particularly, a pilot did not take up a strange aircraft for the first time with the deliberate intention of diving faster than sound. Chuck Yeager had been thrust through the 'barrier' at mach 1·5 (one-and-a-half times the speed of sound) in the rocket-propelled Bell X-1 released from a Superfortress; and the P.86 was reported to be nosing beyond mach 1·0 in dives. But an aircraft's behaviour in supersonic flight was still very much a matter of conjecture. Compressibility effects, the turbulence from the shock waves as the airflow began to change from subsonic to supersonic, causing severe vibration and buffeting of the aircraft and sometimes ineffectiveness of controls, was still a very real problem which had to be approached cautiously with a programme of gradual increases in speed. In England the man who had then come closest to the speed of sound was Geoffrey de Havilland, in a flight which had cost him his life when the D.H.108 broke up in mid-air.

After the straight wing aircraft to which Beamont was accustomed the P.86 seemed to take a much longer time to become airborne. He had left the end of the concrete runway and was well over the salt lake before the aircraft had gained sufficient speed for him to settle down on a climb to 36,000 feet.

California spread out beneath him: a flatness of Mohave Desert matching that of the Pacific Ocean which bordered the distant horizon; the puckered ridge of the Sierra Nevada mountains, and the etched shadow of Los Angeles at the coast.

More than the handling of the P.86 he noticed at first the contrast between flying in the United States and in Britain. At home he was lucky if he found six such days of perfection in visibility and flying conditions within a year. Here at 36,000 feet it seemed as if one could see the weather for days ahead following the same ideal, settled pattern.

For a moment he gave himself to the sheer enchantment of flying, chasing across the sky with an exultant feeling of space and freedom unconfined. And then he was a test pilot again, feeling the controls, noting the reactions of the aircraft. The ailerons, as Welsh had said, were much more sensitive than those he was accustomed to, but apart from that the P.86 was flying easily and smoothly, a creature of powerful efficiency rather than beauty.

Gently he put the nose down, gradually increasing the angle of the dive and letting the speed build up until the needle of the machmeter quivered on 0·95.

Beamont pulled out slowly. It had been a smooth dive with no unpleasant characteristics. The aircraft had remained easily under control throughout and had left him with the impression of considerable reserves of speed in hand. He was confident then that he could reach the speed of sound in a dive, and that the boisterous claims of the pilots the night before were well-founded.

He looked at the fuel gauge. There was enough for one more climb and dive, but that was all. It would mean foregoing any aerobatics.

He made up his mind at once. This, he knew, was sure to be his only flight in the P.86, and perhaps his only chance for years of making a supersonic dive. He eased back the control column and lifted the nose of the P.86. 'Test flight to near limitations' would be the official phraseology of the report in his log book.

Levelling out at 35,000 feet, he opened up in a full throttle run to maximum speed and rolled into a steep dive. He trimmed the aircraft quickly, and braced himself in anticipation of the 'G' force which might occur in recovery from it. On the instrument panel the hand of the machmeter swung forward round the dial, whilst the altimeter needle raced backwards through hundred of feet into thousands.

32,000 feet, mach 0·9, he read. 30,000 feet, mach 0·97.

With no means of visual reference speed loses flavour at altitude. The earth is too far away to provide the customary impression of a streaming panorama and blurred landscape. But now as the P.86 hurtled into the transonic region between subsonic and supersonic flight, Beamont felt speed as a combat of opposing forces. An all-out straining of the thrust of the P.86's jet against the air which no longer had time to divide ahead but piled up like snow against a plough, into a compressed wall of rising resistance to the aircraft. Trapped in this vice, the P.86 began to buffet and shake, and set his muscles quivering in unison.

A wing dropped and the control column jerked, but forewarned by Welsh, he was ready for the change in trim and with a firm movement of the controls held the P.86 in a steady line of dive. Then crouching forward, cautiously, deliberately, he relaxed his grip on the control column in order to maintain a sensitive touch.

Intently his eyes watched the instrument panel. The needle of the machmeter had slowed to a quivering hesitation.

29,500 feet, mach 0.99, he read. 29,000 feet, mach 0·99.

The P.86 was riding roughly now, striving to buck and veer like an unbroken filly as shock waves built up on the wings and broke the airflow into a turbulence of fluctuating pressure. Trim changes tugged violently at the aircraft and again he had to grip firmly to keep his will imposed. Mind and body tensed he held the column steady and forced the nose down.

28,500 feet. Through eyes that were slits he saw the machmeter needle shake forward with an agonizing slowness.

28,000 feet. The needle was at mach 1·0. Quivering but definitely mach 1·0 and showing willingness to move further forward still. Hold her there, hold her there, he willed himself. 27,500 feet. Mach 1·01. Hold her there, hold her. Let there be no mistake. Hold her! Mach 1·01. . . . Mach 1·01. . . .

Relaxed and content, Beamont came out of the dive at 20,000 feet and for the first time since take-off called the North American flight office on the radio as he had been briefed to do.

‘Mach one dive completed. Very satisfactory,’ he reported.

The news took the controller out of his stride, and there was a perceptible pause before his voice found the routine acknowledgment: ‘Roger.’

‘P.86 returning to base,’ announced Beamont.

He switched off the radio telephone, checked his fuel, and throttled back into an easy dive. By saving on the descent, he reckoned, he should have enough left to allow him one run over the measured mile on Lake Muroc. At that time the world's speed record stood at 650 m.p.h. and it was obvious to him that the P.86 would be able to equal that easily.

Distance shrank and detail grew larger until he picked out Muroc Salt Lake, and the black mile-long strip across the middle of the greyish whiteness.

Opening up the throttle again at 3,000 feet, he gathered speed in a diving turn that brought him levelling out with the end of the black strip darting towards him. Now speed was a sense of breathless haste and pace, with earth blurred into a scurrying ribbon of headlong retreat. At an indicated airspeed of 650 m.p.h. he covered the measured distance, and went straight in to land with the fuel tanks almost dry.

An American colonel met him at dispersal. 'You made the most of your first flight, bud,' he said. 'Gee, I just hate to think of the heart attacks the State Department in Washington will have when they know a foreigner has dived the P.86 at mach one.'

'I was briefed that she had done more than mach one in a dive,' Beamont said mildly.

'Sure; and the boys were stringing you along last night about the supersonic flights the P.86 had made, I know. But, gosh, they never reckoned that you'd take them at their word. Anyway you can probably do with some coffee after all that.'

In the canteen the colonel called across to a major in a powder-blue uniform of the U.S.A.F. 'Chuck, come on over a minute will you?'

He turned to Beamont. 'You know Chuck Yeager? He has been doing the supersonic schedule in the Bell XS-1.'

'Chuck, this is Beamont, a British pilot who's over here on a flight mission.'

Major Charles Yeager was not amused. 'Oh, this is the limey they let loose with the P.86,' he growled. 'And I can't get a ride in it myself yet.'

The colonel grinned at Beamont as Yeager stumped away, but he said with a quiet seriousness: 'You know, when the authority for your flight in the P.86 was given, I am sure no one bargained for a mach one dive. In the interest of diplomatic relations I guess it would be as well if you kept that part of it to yourself.'

Apart from his consciousness of security regulations, no less strict in Britain than in the United States, it was not in Beamont's nature to have talked about the flight to anyone not directly concerned. To his embarrassment, however, the story of the flight broke three days later in the Californian newspapers. Suspicion at once fell upon him until investigation proved that an over-zealous aeronautical journal had been keeping the Muroc airfield under regular observation. The flight of the P.86 that morning had been seen and the story pieced together by a journalist.

News of what then appeared to be the first faster than sound flight by a British pilot stayed on the other side of the Atlantic.

Attempts to check on reports and rumours of the flight with both the Ministry of Supply and Beamont himself were met by a blank wall of professed ignorance. Not until John Derry was hailed as the first British pilot to fly faster than sound, did the aeronautical press repeat American reports of Beamont's flight in the P.86 and establish his claim to the distinction.

Derry's dive in the D.H.108 in September, 1948, had, however, set off the hitherto unknown sonic bang, and it was difficult to understand why this phenomenon, which became a regular accompaniment to supersonic dives in this country, had not been experienced in the United States. Subsequent investigations proved that the pitot head on the P.86 was situated in a position where it was liable to be affected by shock waves and turbulence in the airflow. With a resultant error of up to 0·03 and 0·04 in the machmeter reading, this meant that the true speed of dives in the P.86 had been nearer mach 0·98.

In the light of subsequent experience Beamont personally grew certain that his dive in the P.86 was not quite supersonic and that John Derry was without doubt the first British pilot to exceed the speed of sound.

CHAPTER XXI

FIRST FLIGHTS

MONTHS of research work with a Vampire, a Meteor IV, and a Halifax to test the different types of controls, brakes and equipment proposed for the new jet bomber followed. Brakes failed on touch-down, but it was a Vampire, and not the Canberra, which ran off the runway. Once a cockpit hood burst at 43,000 feet. Beamont's senses drained from him in the rush of the explosive decompression, but it was a Vampire that for a time was in jeopardy until with aching ears, Beamont regained consciousness at 38,000 feet, and recovered control for the cold, draughty, return to base.

Thus the experience gained from these flying test beds provided knowledge without risk to the result of four years of work, hope, and investment that was rapidly approaching completion: knowledge that was leaving nothing to chance in the degree of safety and efficiency with which the first jet bomber would take the air.

By May, the Rolls Royce Avons had been installed, the engine test runs completed, and the programme of taxying tests began at Warton. Slow taxying runs at first with complete turns to port and starboard, and brake pressure checked against engine revolutions to the point where the wheels could no longer be held without chocks. Gradually the speed of the runs was increased until the Canberra was rising off the ground for short distances; and Beamont, whilst observing minutely the functioning of all the systems and controls was able to gain a first idea of its 'feel' in flight.

Taxying runs with full and reduced fuel load—the conditions of pre-flight and after landing—taxying with and without an observer in the second seat, brought him to the stage of deliberate hops to a height of ten to fifteen feet above the runway over a quarter mile distance. By the standards of the Wright brothers the aircraft was flying, but straight hops are no longer officially regarded as flights. It is these hops, however, which enable the pilot to test initially in comparative safety the response and effectiveness of ailerons, elevator and rudder.

On May 11, Beamont recorded his first straight hop:

> A normal take-off followed by 400 yards' flight and a normal landing, during all of which the elevator was found to function satisfactorily. Rudder corrections were also applied satisfactorily to counteract drift in cross-wind conditions.

Next day, preparations for the first flight were completed with two more straight hops:

> Full power was used and the aircraft was pulled off quickly by a 15–20 lb. stick force (tailplane setting slightly lower than on previous test). Once airborne, aileron control reaction was checked by large angle application, and the results regarded as satisfactory, response being quite good for this condition with maximum stick force approximately 15 lbs.

The only adverse note at this stage was an erractic air speed indicator. 'This condition is not considered sufficiently severe to interfere with the immediate programme,' wrote Beamont. 'Aircraft to be prepared for first flight condition.'

The following morning was Friday the thirteenth but Beamont gave the superstition no thought as he sat in the cockpit and methodically checked all the services. The straight hops had already given him assurance that the aircraft could fly. Now it depended upon him, upon his skill, to see that the manifestation of years of hope and hard work by Petter and his design team who stood watching anxiously on the tarmac, came to no harm.

'Probably,' he thought as he taxied past, 'the poor devils are feeling much more anxious than I am.'

He lined up at the end of the runway, and did a final cockpit check. Satisfied, he called the control office.

'Tarnish One to Warton. Ready to go.'

'Tarnish One. Clear to take off.' The gruff voice was impersonal and without emotion. Only the silence which followed in the control room and the unanimous straining of eyes towards the end of the runway lost in distance, betrayed the fact that this was something more than the routine take-off which the radio telephone had suggested.

Beamont put the flaps down, trimmed for take-off, opened the throttles. Power shook the aircraft as the thrust of the engines strained against the brakes. The speed of the engine revolutions neared their maximum. He let go the brakes and in a burst of unleashed energy which pressed him hard into his seat, the Canberra surged forward, speed building up rapidly until he eased the bomber off the runway.

He felt the control column become alive under his hands like the reins of a horse fighting for its head. Though he set the trimmer to the fully nose-down position, the aircraft was still trying to climb. At 200 feet he reduced power and raised the undercarriage which retracted satisfactorily but set the aircraft yawing slightly to port. Immediately Beamont corrected with right rudder, but after a very small reaction the rudder force decreased suddenly.

'Probably over-balanced,' he noted and corrected with left rudder pressure to bring the aircraft into a straight climb to 5,000 feet. Levelling out he settled down to a speed of 170 knots, but still the aircraft fought him, striving to climb, and in addition to full nose-down trim he was having to exert a push force against the stick of twenty to thirty pounds to hold the shallow climb. With the retraction of the flaps, the pressure on the stick eased, and adjusting the trim until the aircraft felt perfectly balanced, Beamont took his hands off the control column. The Canberra continued steadily in stable flight.

Beamont nodded his satisfaction, and scribbled on the pad strapped to his knee: 'Trimmed hands off at 245 knots IAS [indicated air speed] tailplane two graduations up from nose down.'

Against a Vampire V, flown alongside by Johnny Squier, watching that all doors and fairings were closed, and observing the exterior behaviour of the controls, he checked the accuracy of the air speed indicator, and began a more exhaustive investigation of the rudder operation, confirming beyond doubt that over a small range of movement the rudder was partly over-balanced.

It was a minor point calling for simple modification, but this lack of precise rudder control meant cutting short the engine handling tests. As it was, on coming in to land he encountered a patch of rough air which set up a yawing oscillation that he could not fully control with the rudder.

He cut the engines five hundred yards short of the runway and held off at a hundred knots to touch down smoothly. He had been in the air twenty-seven minutes. The Canberra had passed the first hurdle. A good flight, he told himself happily. Apart from the rudder condition, all services had operated satisfactorily, and the aircraft had handled smoothly and easily, with engines and airframe proving remarkably quiet in flight.

Beamont was fortunate in having at the start of his career as a chief test pilot, a chief designer who liked to foster initiative. More often than not a sharp line has been drawn between pilots and scientists who have taken the attitude that the pilot is there for no other reason than to drive the machine, and that design certainly is no concern of his.

The introduction of the jet engine leading to the perplexities of high speed flight and particularly the problems, at first largely unpredictable, of an aircraft's behaviour in the region of the speed of sound, created much greater need for co-operation. Nevertheless the breaking down of the scientists' prejudice against what they were liable to regard as interference on the part of the pilot, has generally been a slow, gradual process.

Cockpit planning and instrument layout, sensitivity and response of controls, vision from the cockpit are amongst the factors of aircraft design in which it is now being accepted that designers' theories can perhaps be profitably influenced by pilots' practical knowledge. The test pilot may also be expected to advise broadly on questions of maximum landing speeds and distances, and approach angles and attitudes.

Petter was never one of those who resented opinions from their pilots. His own outlook is expressed in a letter to Beamont when he was leaving the English Electric Company some years later to concentrate upon his ideas for a light fighter.

'I have enjoyed our work together tremendously,' he wrote. 'Your job requires so much more than skilful flying. It needs courage, willingness to work, co-operation and good judgment. You showed what is, in my experience, an altogether exceptional combination of these, and what is more you have not allowed success to turn your head, which alas, spoils so many good chief test pilots. I do hope you never will. And your life has not been free from petty but annoying irritations! You have a great future if you go on as you have begun, and I am delighted that you recognize the vital part you still have to play in launching the Canberra.'

If Petter had a reputation in some quarters of being a difficult man, it was because of a fixity of belief in his own ideas which it was very hard to shake. But of more importance was the fact that he always encouraged the members of his team to make suggestions, which he would consider and, of course, disregard or accept as he thought fit.

Dive brakes, for example, were one point on which designer and pilot could not see eye to eye. Beamont with the background of a fighter pilot, wanted them. Petter, agreeing that they would be essential on a fighter, insisted that he was building a bomber that would not be called upon to perform the aerobatics of a fighter, and therefore had no need for dive brakes.

Later when the Canberra was nearing completion, a senior Ministry of Supply official was shown the aircraft by Petter.

'Where are the dive brakes?' he asked.

'There are no dive brakes,' Petter replied.

The visitor was surprised. 'Are you sure that is wise?' he queried.

Petter looked glum. To start fitting dive brakes at that stage was going to set back the schedule considerably. He raised the subject again with Beamont, and it was finally agreed that dive brakes were not essential on the prototype but that they should be fitted to the operational machines.

The absence of dive brakes on the prototype Canberra had a curious sequel when the Canberra was given its first public demonstration at Farnborough in September, 1949. Bomber the Canberra might be, but to Beamont it was an aircraft with low wing loading, excellent controls and two Rolls Royce Avon engines producing well in excess of the released minimum figure of 12,000 pounds thrust. He had seen the bomber grow from mock-up into reality, had seen the care and the thoroughness, and the checking and rechecking of Petter and his team of aerodynamicists and engineers. There was no other aircraft in which he had so much natural, well-founded confidence. No other aircraft had he known inside and out quite so well.

Half an hour before the Canberra's time on the programme, Beamont left the pilots' tent and went to his aircraft. He had already rehearsed and timed carefully two programmes—one a substitute for use in bad weather—for the five minutes' demonstration period allotted him. Fortunately on this opening day the weather was perfect.

He signalled the starter crew. The engines roared into a high-pitched screech of energy. The Canberra was a pilot's aircraft, all right. It had the power, it had the capabilities. Why should it be expected to remain staid and reserved just because it had been designated bomber instead of fighter? He would show the crowd that in manœuvrability and aerobatics the Canberra could more than compete with any fighter of the day. A short take-off into a near-vertical climb, a grass-cutting high speed run down the runway and roll off a loop in either direction: an approach at nearly six hundred miles an hour, slowing down quickly to a bare hundred for some tight slow turns, and then with full flap and wheels down, a violent rocking by the ailerons to show the control available, approaching the stalling speed.

Beamont taxied to the end of the runway. The aircraft preceding him in the display was still running along the runway when Farnborough Control called up: 'Canberra, clear to take off.'

The crowd waited without undue excitement. The Canberra was new, it was Britain's first jet bomber and this was the first public demonstration. But to many its lines looked too conventional to attract interest. In the eye of a public excited at a future of sweep-back and delta and other revolutionary designs, straight wing, twin-engine bombers seemed already to belong to the past.

Beamont let go the brakes. The Canberra which, under the thrust of the jet had been bowing on the leg of the nose wheel, lifted as it ran free from restraint, building up speed. Beamont had covered only one-third of the runway when, using the president's tent as a marker, he threw back the control column and pulled the aircraft off the ground. For a moment the Canberra appeared to be standing on its jet thrust and then it was gone, rocketing into an almost vertical climb that drew with it the necks of the crowd and banished whatever lack of interest there might have been. Now they were craning forward, searching the sky, excitedly waiting the next run of the aircraft whose more or less orthodox lines had taken them unawares.

At 2,000 feet Beamont half rolled out of the climb into a diving turn back for Farnborough, a bottle shape with a long neck of runway spreading at the far end into a forest of spectators who had lost all identity save for the glinting flashes of cars' windscreens. From three miles out Beamont put the nose down and the grey ribbon of runway and the tents and the crowd streamed in a blur towards him and then spun away as he lifted the wing into a roll.

Again he thundered towards the runway and abruptly throttled back, applying full flap and opening the bomb doors as a makeshift for dive brakes. The roar of the jet subsided in a howl of slipstream as the speed dropped suddenly from over five hundred to less than a hundred and fifty miles an hour. Like a runner pulled up by an invisible finishing tape, the Canberra seemed to stop dead in mid-air; and almost as quickly the excited admiration of the crowd gave place to a numbing horror as they saw three or four fragments come away from the aircraft and fall to earth.

In the cockpit Beamont felt a sharp change in trim. 'God, what was that?' he exclaimed aloud.

'Might have been one of the bomb doors,' suggested his flight observer, Dave Walker.

Beamont checked with the control column. The aircraft was still flying smoothly and he was reassuring himself that the trim change was caused by the opening of the bomb doors when the Farnborough controller called him on radio telephone:

'Canberra, you are dropping pieces.'

'Roger, coming in for immediate landing.

Instinctively he banked in a tight turn away from the crowd and the buildings of the Royal Aircraft Establishment, towards the open fields at the far end of the runway. Even as he did so he caught a glimpse of a scarlet fire-tender and white ambulance drawing out in front of the control tower to wait with engines running on the perimeter.

Walker drew his attention to the engine instrument panel. The starboard engine instruments were reading zero. Apparently he had lost an engine.

He throttled back into a steep gliding turn that would place the aircraft on the final approach. Above all he told himself, he had to make his return appear normal to the crowd below.

On the radio Farnborough Control was calling the Comet to get off the runway, and a moment later he saw the airliner move forward and rise into the air. Good, he thought, exactly as scheduled. One takes off as the other comes in to land.

Cautiously Beamont brought the Canberra into line with the end of the runway. It did not feel crippled at all, and in spite of the evidence of the instrument panel he could not believe he had lost an engine. Only that first change of trim suggested any disability; but Control had seen something go and there was no time for further checking.

Alert for the unexpected he held off over the aerodrome boundary and then gradually eased the Canberra down until the wheels were gently running along the runway.

Once securely down he opened up the starboard throttle. The burst of power as he taxied off the runway reassured him that obviously the starboard engine was functioning even though the instruments were not. But already his relief was being assailed by a new worry. Would there be time to have whatever the damage was put right, and the Canberra serviceable for the next day's display?

He pulled up on the perimeter, and Walker dropped to the ground to investigate. He returned with his face in smiles.

'It's O.K., Bee,' he reported. 'It's only the auto-observer.'

Ripped from its mountings when the bomb doors were opened, the auto-observer had cut the electric wiring, and put out of action the engine revolution indicator on the instrument panel.

No other harm had been done, and with the ground crew working all night to prevent a recurrence of the incident, Beamont was demonstrating the Canberra again on the following day. 'Never,' said *Flight*, 'had a new aircraft been so convincingly demonstrated.'

For once the triumphant dexterity with which a bomber was flown stole the glamour of the fighters at the Society of British Aircraft Constructors' Show. And in the months that followed, the Canberra's manœuvrability and the ease and artistry with which it was handled, provided the highlights at a succession of air displays both at home and overseas. No longer was a bomber an unwieldy creature of strictly utilitarian purpose. In poetry and exultation of movement the Canberra gave expression to jet flight as a fine art far removed from the grim need that had fostered its birth.

CHAPTER XXII

THE ATLANTIC RECORDS

DEVELOPMENT of the Canberra proved exceptionally rapid and free from hold-ups. Normally delays in equipping the R.A.F. with a new machine result from the trials of aircraft and engines, but the production of the Canberra in fact outstripped the development of the special equipment which it needed, and was ready to go into service long before the radar bombing equipment for use at the specified operational altitude had been perfected. In the first production model, therefore, the dual seats of the prototype had to be increased to three and additional equipment incorporated to provide for a bomb-aimer for visual bombing.

It was evident too that the Canberra's performance at low level as well as at great height offered a range of use far beyond its primary function as a high altitude bomber. Even the Americans, who perhaps more than anybody had at first been inclined to disparage the absence of revolutionary idea in the design, began to take an interest in the Canberra's versatility; and in September, after Beamont had demonstrated before a visiting mission, the United States requested that a Canberra should be sent to them for assessment.

At that time the official record covering the transatlantic flight was held by two Germans, A. Henke and R. von Moreau, who had flown a Focke Wolfe 200 Kondor from Berlin to New York in twenty-four hours, fifty-six minutes, twelve seconds on August 10/11. Two days later they flew back, establishing an official time of nineteen hours, fifty-five minutes, one second from New York to Berlin, compared with the record flight of H. T. Merrill and J. S. Lambe in a Lockheed Electra of twenty hours, twenty-nine minutes, between New York and London.

Since then flights of well under ten hours had become commonplace both by military aircraft ferried to Britain during the war, and post-war transatlantic civil airliners. One wartime Mosquito made a crossing from Newfoundland in five hours, ten minutes, and a Pan American Airways clipper had logged a time of under seven hours in but neither of these times had been officially observed. Obviously the Canberra was going to reduce considerably even these unofficial timings.

No man could have had better claim to the honour of making the first jet crossing of the Atlantic than Roland Beamont, but the authorities thought differently. As the Canberra was a Ministry aircraft it was decided that delivery to the United States should be made by a Service crew. It might perhaps have been argued that the aircraft did not belong to the R.A.F. until it had been officially handed over, but Beamont himself would have contested such a course. Any private disappointment he may have felt at heart was preferable to quibbling unpleasantness at such a time.

The intention that the R.A.F. should also be responsible for demonstrating the Canberra was a different matter. Upon that demonstration might well depend the sale of the Canberra as the United States' new medium bomber, a sale not only important as a dollar-earner but one that would considerably enhance national prestige. It was vital indeed that the Canberra should be demonstrated to the fullest advantage.

In Squadron Leader A. E. Callard, D.F.C., the R.A.F. had selected an expert pilot who would fly the Canberra across the Atlantic as well as any man. Callard, however, would have been the first to admit that with a bare ten or twelve hours' flying experience of the Canberra, he had not the specialized experience to enable him to give a demonstration as comprehensive as that of a pilot who had been brought up with the aircraft, and whose flying of her had earned him the title of 'Supreme jet bomber test pilot of the decade' from the aeronautical press.

After representations from various sources last minute counsel prevailed. Whilst Squadron Leader Callard with Flight Lieutenant A. J. Robson, D.F.C., radio operator, and Flight Lieutenant Edward Haskett, navigator, took the Canberra on the first jet crossing of the Atlantic from Aldergrove, Northern

Ireland, to Gander, Newfoundland in four hours, twenty-seven minutes, Beamont was sent by airliner to do the actual demonstration.

The change in plan had been left so late that when Beamont arrived he found that not only was nobody expecting him, but he could not even obtain a pass to the airfield where the Canberra was to be demonstrated. In growing frustration he tackled all the British authorities in Washington but each time came up against the same blank wall: the Canberra was in the hands of the R.A.F.; they had heard nothing to the contrary; knew nothing about Beamont's statement, unsupported by any documents that he was to demonstrate the aircraft; and if there had been any alteration in arrangements, it was up to London to notify them and not for them to query London.

Finally when he had almost abandoned hope Beamont ran to earth a visiting senior official of the Ministry of Supply, who held the personal view that the occasion demanded the best possible demonstration of the Canberra. After much discussion the official decided that this was no time for respecting red tape, and he started the exchange of a number of transatlantic cables and telephone calls.

Late that afternoon the official telephoned Beamont at his hotel. 'Yes, you are to fly the Canberra,' he said. 'Tomorrow morning at Washington. And it is in order for you to visit the airfield as soon as you wish to make arrangements for the demonstration.'

Though the ice which had bound the airfield for the past week had gone, the air of that sparkling clear February morning cut with a crystal coldness. A spout of grey smoke gushed from the engine as the cartridge starter fired. The roar of the Rolls Royce Avons rose to a whine, and with a dust cloud sweeping back across the field from the exhaust, the Canberra taxied to the end of the concrete runway. Beamont turned into wind and let the bomber go, screaming down the runway to rise into a vertical climb opposite the group of high ranking U.S.A.F. officers and officials from the Washington Air Department who stood, huddled in greatcoats, outside the control tower.

The manœuvres were now second nature to him. 'And next the Canberra. . . . Voici Canberra. . . . Hier ist Canberra. . . .' Half a dozen different tongues had heralded that impressive take-off as a prelude to a spectacular display at air shows in different parts of Europe. But never had so much been at stake as on that first demonstration in the New World on February 23,

In the cockpit Beamont was more than usually happy. The worries and frustrations that had accompanied his arrival to New York were behind him; and with no thought but the joy of flying, the exhilarating sensation of speed at low level, and the confident reassurance of almost supernatural understanding between man and machine, he swung into a tight circuit. It was the programme as before, the tight circuit at low and high speed, the figures of eight, the low slow pass, the low high-speed pass down wind; but the very purpose of this particular demonstration and the small, select, audience gave it added zest.

Flushed with the satisfaction of a performance which he knew was one of the best, Beamont came into land. Unknown to him the runway had been covered as a protection against ice with a white sand almost indistinguishable against the concrete. The Canberra touched down smoothly, but the moment that he applied the wheel brakes the sand burnt into the slowing rubber. A tyre exploded loudly. The aircraft jarred and slewed, and Beamont was fighting hard to keep it straight as it throbbed to a standstill.

Mentally cursing, he clambered out of the cockpit. 'Today of all days!' he protested to an insensible Fate.

Irritating though it might be to the pilot, the burst tyre was of no significance. Within six days of the demonstration the Secretary of the United States Air Department announced their decision to build the Canberra.

Although the Air Ministry had insisted that they should be responsible for flying the Canberra to the United States, they maintained that it was no more than a routine delivery, and took no steps to have the flight observed officially for record purposes. Some months later when another Canberra had to be delivered to the Glenn L. Martin Company, Baltimore, who were to build under licence a night intruder version for the U.S.A.F., it was left to the English Electric Company to make arrangements, and they decided to use the opportunity to allow Beamont to attempt an official record for the transatlantic crossing.

The regulations laid down by the Federation Aeronautique Internationale, the body which governs all aeronautical records, stipulate that distance records can only be established between capital and capital. The shortest acceptable transatlantic flight is therefore between Belfast, capital of Northern Ireland, and Saint John, capital of Newfoundland.

Belfast's nearest suitable aerodrome is the R.A.F. Station Aldergrove, fourteen miles west of the capital; and to compensate for this start, the F.A.I. stipulated that the flight should finish over Gander Lake at a point fourteen miles inland from St. John. Two boats equipped with observers and time recording apparatus were to be moored at the far end of the lake and the Canberra was to circle over them for identification at under 500 feet.

Apart from the official notification of the record attempt and a request to the Royal Aero Club to observe the start, the only difference occasioned by making the flight a record attempt was the fact that Beamont was prepared to wait a day or two in the hope of encountering more favourable winds. Unofficial though the timing was, Callard's flight had set him a formidable target and inspired a spirit of competition which would otherwise have been lacking. Obviously if his time were outside Callard's, it would be ludicrous to think of claiming a record; and he would need something in hand to cover the extra distance and descent to 500 feet over Gander Lake before his time could be logged.

For a week as they completed their proving flights and range tests Beamont with his crew of the Company's staff navigator, Squadron Leader D. A. Watson, and Mr. R. H. T. Ryland of the Marconi Company as radio operator, studied the reports arriving from the meteorological stations on both sides of the Atlantic and the weather ships in mid-ocean. Persistent head winds of over eighty miles an hour at 40,000 feet were not encouraging, but time was getting short. Autumn was very close and soon the westerly gales would be settling in to rule out all chance of a record crossing.

The first reports that the wind force was slackening arrived during the night of August 30, and as the aircraft was now ready Beamont decided to waste no time. Low cloud and a discouraging mist hung round Warton aerodrome on Friday morning, August 31, but at 9.34 a.m. the Canberra took off and flew past the group of English Electric employees to climb on course for the R.A.F. Station, Aldergrove. Over the Irish Sea the cloud broke and they landed in Northern Ireland in very good visibility.

Leaving instructions for the tanks to be topped up, Beamont went to the Met. office. Reports from Gander were good and flying conditions over the Atlantic favourable. The only snag was the forecast covering the second half of the ocean where cross winds of sixty knots were veering into head winds of eighty knots. Beamont chewed on his pipe stem and studied the weather chart thoughtfully. Those winds put out of question his private goal of a four-hour crossing. Yet the forecast was by far the best there had been in ten days, and with September upon them the chances were that the conditions might not be bettered that year.

Caution still prompted him, however. Nothing like a hidden margin of five minutes in hand, he decided, and deliberately gave Watson a pessimistic speed on which to base his flight.

Watson went to work calculating the effect of the varying wind velocities over the different stages of the flight upon the Canberra's track and ground speed. Unconscious of the allowance Beamont had already made, Watson too decided to play safe, and without saying anything, added an extra five minutes to his calculations. 'Four hours, twenty-five minutes,' he announced.

Beamont considered a moment. Twelve minutes inside Callard's time. Seventeen, perhaps, with his hidden margin. Not nearly as good as he had hoped. But still——

'We'll go,' he said.

Once again the crew and ground staff checked and rechecked instruments and controls; and identification seals were placed on the engine and airframe by the official observer appointed by the Royal Aero Club acting on behalf of the Federation Aeronautique Internationale.

Beamont is a man who likes a good safety margin of fuel on any flight. A minute or two of additional flying in reserve, he decided, was more than worth the cost of an extra minute or so at the beginning of the journey. He chose therefore to make a standing start and, again to save fuel, had the Canberra towed out to the runway by tractors. Not until the last minute were the engines started.

Satisfied, Beamont gave the thumbs-up signal, and the Royal Aero Club observer at the end of the runway dropped a white flag and started a stop watch. It was 1.24, British Summer Time. Beamont opened the throttles and took-off in a climb straight on to course to follow a great circle route of 2,072 miles to Gander.

Since midday a series of dark anvil-shaped thunder clouds had been building up over Northern Ireland, and for ten minutes the Canberra tossed bumpily in the turbulent murk, with rain driving against it and lightning flickering about the wing tip. Then, abruptly, with that breathtaking change which never failed to quicken him, they were out of cloud into brilliant sunshine, and the weather's storm and gloom was below, a billowing, floating eiderdown washed soft and white by the warmth of the sun.

He levelled out and settled down, concentrating on keeping a steady course, and checking regularly his fuel consumption and engine conditions against the passing minutes.

Behind him Rylands was busy at the radio, contacting an Atlantic weather ship and the wireless stations in Northern Ireland, and passing the bearings to Watson to plot and check the aircraft's position against the flight plan. Each half-hour Rylands reported the Canberra's progress to base:

'2 p.m. B.S.T. Canberra to Portished. Approaching completion of first quarter stage. Half way to weather ship.'

'2.30 p.m. past first quarter stage. 518 miles in under 67 minutes. Average speed 464 m.p.h.'

The comparatively low average was the result of the take-off from the standing start and the climb through the thunderstorms. During the next hour, however, the Canberra, flying at 45,000 feet with a peaceful smoothness and absence of vibration, was to cover 520 miles, racing with the sun, which to the crew stayed noticeably still in the same position in the sky. By the end of that hour the average speed of the flight had been raised by twenty-five miles and at 3.30 p.m. the radio operator was tapping out on the morse key: 'Canberra to Portishead. Past half way stage. Average speed 489 m.p.h.'

With cloud still screening the ocean they passed the second weather ship in mid-Atlantic without seeing it, fixing their position by radio contact a few miles south of track. It was the last fix they were to get. Spreading five hundred miles out into the Atlantic from the coast of Newfoundland was a severe electrical storm which began to play havoc with the radio bearings. Rylands toiled continuously with his set, but without result, and Watson was left dependent entirely upon 'dead reckoning' for alterations of course.

Time for beginning to lose height drew near. The flight plan was based on a descent which would start two hundred miles from Gander and bring them in the shortest possible time over the lake at the required height for identification. Accuracy in starting the descent was essential if precious minutes were not to be wasted either by overshooting, or by letting down too soon and having to fly on at low level and considerably reduced speed. Gander was not equipped with VHF equipment for homing them onto the airport, and once they had to start searching for the lake, hopes of the record would be seriously jeopardized. At this point more than any other they had wanted to obtain an exact check on their position.

Rylands made a last urgent attempt to pick up a radio station on the North American coast, but shook his head. The electrical interference from the storm raging in the thick mass of cloud below them, made an accurate bearing impossible. Watson drew in the new course on the flight plan, considered again the forecast wind of the area in the light of the wind change he had obtained from his last definite fix, and passed the time and course for descent to the pilot.

Beamont glanced at it and set the new course in his compass in readiness. He scanned the sky ahead. Still no sign of a break in cloud. How far did it stretch, he wondered anxiously. All attempts to obtain a local weather report from Gander had failed.

He followed the second hand of his watch round to the exact minute of the time that Watson had given him, signalled with his thumb to the navigator, and put the nose of the Canberra down.

Down from the remoteness and smoothness of flight at 47,000 feet they descended, into the billowing whiteness that dirtied quickly into a grey oppressive fog. For some minutes they flew blind on their instruments through the woolly murk until it seemed to gather speed, turning and pulling itself to pieces, and they were out in the open over a cataract of blue sea dotted with small white islands of low level clouds. Far, far, away a purple line smudged the horizon.

Beamont looked questioningly at Watson who had left the navigator's table and was standing alongside him staring at the faint blur between sea and sky.

'I don't think it's cloud shadow,' he said, 'but if it is land, it must be a hundred miles away.'

Land seen in exceptional visibility from one hundred miles it proved to be. A purple shadow growing into the rugged detail of the Newfoundland coastline, and bringing evidence that they had crossed the Atlantic on dead reckoning and were less than ten miles off track.

Map reading, they altered course visually and flashed across Gander Airport at 3,000 feet in a high speed dive which ended over the lake in the forest, at 500 feet. At the far end they recognized the two observer boats and circled above them. A signal flare shot up in acknowledgment.

Watson completed his log. 'Four hours, eighteen minutes,' he announced triumphantly.

'Good-oh,' commented Beamont, and added drily: 'Well inside that estimated time you gave me this morning, aren't we, Watty?'

'But, Bee, you have been keeping up a higher air speed than the figure you gave me in the Met. office this morning,' Watson protested.

'True. I thought we'd work on the safe side and have a minute or two to play with, but I didn't think it would make all that difference.'

Watson swallowed. 'It didn't really. You see, I added five minutes myself to be on the safe side.'

They headed back for the airport. In the circuit Beamont switched on the radio.

A Canadian accent from Gander control tower drawled: 'Hello Canberra. This is Gander control. Your official time for crossing is four hours, eighteen minutes, thirty seconds. Congratulations. Clear to land. Runway two-six. Q.F.E. one-zero-one-two. Over.'

By less than an hour they had failed to beat the sun; but they had nevertheless set the stage for the days of trans-Atlantic flight in a state of perpetual sunrise or sunset at the travellers' choice.

In the years since the first epoch-making flight of Alcock and Brown from Newfoundland to Ireland in 1919, many people had crossed the Atlantic both ways. No one however, had flown across and back again within one day.

The idea of the double crossing grew naturally out of the record flight of August 30, Obviously a day return flight was well within the capacity of the Canberra, but there is no longer any place in aeronautical progress for record-breaking for its own sake. Present-day costs of aviation prohibit all but those attempts which fit naturally into the scope of an aircraft's research and development tests.

As a spectacular stunt the idea of a double crossing would have been dismissed out of hand; but a careful consideration showed that much valuable information could be gained. Such a flight would be an opportunity for checking theoretical estimates of the Canberra's performance and behaviour over long distance flight at sustained high speed. A clearer picture would be obtained of physiological effects on the crew, and the practical scope of long-range jet navigation and radio communication. Specific information would be furnished of fuel consumption under maximum cruising speed conditions. These practical gains, in addition to the prestige of such a historic flight and the value of the attendant publicity in influencing both international politics as well as possible sales to allied nations, made the undertaking a worthwhile project indeed.

Permission had first to be obtained from the owners of the aircraft, the Ministry of Supply; and then once again there were the formalities of arranging for the Royal Aero Club to observe the flight officially, and obtaining Air Ministry's permission to use the R.A.F. aerodrome at Aldergrove as base.

Originally it was planned that the double crossing should be made to New York and back, a flight which including the turn-round was likely to take about fourteen hours, and Beamont decided therefore to dispense with a specialist radio operator and take instead Flight Lieutenant Hillwood as second pilot. With Squadron Leader Watson to navigate, as before, the crew started their preparatory flight around the British Isles.

A late decision to change the engines in the aircraft upset their schedule, however, and once again they were faced with the problem of the previous year. To establish a worthwhile record the flight had to be made before the autumn gales set in; and that left insufficient time for proving the range with the new engines for the three-thousand miles flight to New York. No one had any doubt that the distance was well within the capacity of the Canberra, but the rule of all test and research flying, never to take an unnecessary risk, prevailed.

Rather than abandon the plan for the double crossing altogether for that year, it was decided to make the flight to Gander and back, a range that had already been proved.

When the Canberra arrived at Aldergrove on August 25, the weather forecast was a slightly gloomier version of the previous August's story. Head winds of more than eighty miles an hours were reported over almost half the Atlantic, and the outlook for the following three or four days showed a continuing deterioration in conditions generally. Once again it was a question of leaving without delay, or facing an indeterminate wait. Strong head winds would wreck any chances of clipping the existing time for the outward crossing; but on the other hand the Canberra would have the advantage of those winds behind it in the return journey. Out of three possible records they would have to be content with two—the double crossing and the west to east trip.

'Fair enough,' said Beamont and drove from control office to the hangars. A cluster of technicians buzzed around the Canberra, making last-minute checks as she stood outside on the tarmac, a solitary stranger amidst the R.A.F.'s complement of Shackletons and Hastings.

The aircraft was a standard B.5 model, which had been flown for research during the past eighteen months and bore round the nose a white ring used in measured landing tests. In place of the overload wing tanks carried on the previous Atlantic flight, a fuel tank of greater capacity had been fitted into the bomb bay. The only other concession to the project was the di-pole aerial beneath the rear fuselage, fitted as a result of radio compass instability encountered during the electrical storm on the latter part of the Canberra's first record crossing.

The evening was sunny and still. The day's flying was over. The drone of the last taxying aircraft had died into somnolence and the aerodrome was quiet as only an airfield suddenly at rest from the strident noise of its life blood, can be. Beamont felt the peace enter within him. A year before although he had been placid enough in his reassurance to questioners that the record attempt was no more than a matter of routine, he had been unable to disguise from himself the excitement and feeling for the occasion. This time, however, the excitement had come with the permission to undertake the double crossing and had long since spent itself. This time he could state with inner conviction that the attempt on the double crossing was to him one more routine, proving flight.

He stepped into the Canberra and he flew. It was as simple as that. The fact that he was going to stay on a westerly heading for four to five hours, and then head back east, meant no more to him as a pilot than if he were flying round the North Sea, or or up and down Britain.

On the eve of departure he was extraordinarily devoid of anticipation. Free from tension and concern he relaxed in a peace that carried a quality of timelessness. Not even the group of press correspondents waiting for news could disturb the serenity of that summer evening, or imbue the occasion with a sense of history.

Beamont explained the position to them. 'So, as things are going to get worse instead of better,' he finished, 'we shall leave tomorrow morning between six and nine.'

A mess orderly called him at 3.30 a.m. He dressed quickly, yawning himself awake. Life was still very much in the ebb, a silent chill of earth and sky running into one purple grey shroud.

The harsh brilliance of strip lighting in the meteorological office set him yawning again.

'You can't go today,' said the Met. officer bluntly. 'It's out of the question.'

Beamont blinked through the tears of his yawns. 'Why? What's the trouble?'

Stretching for a thousand miles along the route in a belt one hundred and fifty miles wide was a jet stream of high level winds. In places speeds of up to 250 m.p.h. had been plotted, and the average head wind for more than a third of the route was over 100 m.p.h.

Beamont studied the chart in silence, mentally mustering arguments against the gloomy picture it presented. This time he had the advantage of having already flown the Atlantic in a Canberra. This time his aircraft was so much the better with new engines and a greater reserve of fuel. Notwithstanding the jet stream there still remained a reasonable chance of making the double crossing within the hours of daylight.

'What's the flight plan say?' he asked Watson. 'And no throwing in anything for good measure this time!'

Watson grinned. 'Four hours, thirty,' he said at last.

'Fair enough,' Beamont commented. 'We'll go. Take-off, six-thirty.'

He breakfasted with his crew in the mess off the R.A.F.'s traditional operations meal of eggs and bacon. In spite of the early hour the Commanding Officer and many of the station personnel were about in readiness to see the take-off, and reporters were arriving at the airfield still hushed in muffled drowsiness under the cloak of darkness. Not until the Canberra's Rolls Royce Avons screamed their frantic awakening to the paling sky did the aerodrome quicken urgently into life.

The new day was raw and the atmosphere near to dew point. A veil of vapour screened the sun into an orange red ball that struggled hazily above the horizon beyond Lough Neagh. Beamont strapped on his pressure helmet.

'We should be in Gander about eleven,' he told the reporters. 'We hope to leave about one, and be back here soon after four-thirty this afternoon.'

Followed by his crew, Beamont climbed into the Canberra. Dew had settled upon the canopy and he could not see out of the cockpit for the condensation. As quickly as it was wiped clear the perspex clouded over again. Finally a succession of buckets of water was rushed out and thrown over the canopy to keep it from misting until the airflow could take effect and solve the problem.

He taxied to the end of the runway and took-off quickly, banking into a steep climbing turn that brought him back sweeping low at high speed over the control tower where the official timekeeper waited with thumb on the stop watch.

'0635 hours B.S.T. Set course——' Watson began to write in his log, but had to break off as Beamont lifted the nose into a steep climb and the force of gravity crushed his fingers and pencil against the chart table.

For a moment the combination of reddish glare from the sun behind the aircraft, and the atmospheric humidity condensing shock waves over the wings, contrived to produce the horrifying illusion from the ground that the Canberra was on fire; but within seconds she was lost from sight in the grey mist over the loch.

Again it was a case of flying the whole Atlantic without seeing the sea. A close carpet of violet-grey cloud rolled endlessly below them. They missed contact with the first weather ship; and it was not until 9.13 a.m. when they were 1,250 miles from the Irish coast that Watson picked up the American weather ship on the radio compass and obtained his first check on the Canberra's position.

Later as they were trying unsuccessfully to establish radio voice contact with the second U.S. weather ship, they were overheard by the pilot of a Canadian air-liner.

'T.C.A. to Canberra,' he called on the radio telephone. 'I think Ocean Station Charlie is off the air. You are within range of him.'

'Canberra to T.C.A. Roger. Thanks.' Beamont acknowledged.

'You're bound for Gander, aren't you?' continued the Canadian pilot. 'I read about you in the papers this morning. Is that right you're going to turn straight round and fly back to England again?'

'That's the idea,' said Beamont.

'Jeez!' exclaimed the Canadian. 'What a heck of a way to spend a day!'

There was something in what he said, Beamont mused, as the mountainous wastes of cloud stayed with them until they were within a hundred miles of the coast, and then obligingly cleared altogether. Newfoundland floated towards them, her dark fir territory relieved by pools of silver where the morning sun highlighted the surface of the lakes.

Once again they were diving across the glaring blotch of concrete runway and white scarred earth that was Gander. They picked up the observer launches on the lake beyond, and circled back to land in the path of the rising sun that appeared to have moved little from its position above the horizon at take-off from Northern Ireland four hours, thirty-five minutes earlier.

By Canadian time it was 7 a.m. and people were breakfasting, but by Beamont's reckoning it was 11 a.m. He had elected to have an early lunch rather than a second breakfast, and had written in advance asking if arrangements could be made for them to eat in private away from the crowd to avoid risk of delay.

Whilst Watson and Hillwood went off for lunch, Beamont stayed with the Canberra, supervising the checking and refuelling. Once the engine cowls were off and he was satisfied everything was in order, he left the maintenance crew to complete the refuelling and for the first time let his thoughts turn to a steak.

Instead of taking him to a private room in the airport as he had expected, the car drove straight out of the airport. His request for a private meal had been interpreted with literal exactitude and he found himself speeding along a road through the forest to a private house. But he was too much aware of the fact that every passing minute meant another minute for return, to be able to enjoy the scenery. It was only a five minutes' drive but they were five minutes away from the Canberra, and the ten minutes there and back could have been spent in eating.

Hillwood and Watson had finished their steaks and were relaxing contentedly; but now impatience and over-consciousness of time had brought a querulous tension to Beamont's stomach and killed the edge of his hunger. A steak was set before him and he ate rapidly but without enjoyment.

He was half way through it when the telephone rang. 'Canberra refuelled and ready for take-off,' reported the maintenance engineer.

His steak unfinished, Beamont dashed with his crew for the car. They were to fly the Atlantic and back within daylight, but no part of the trip gave quite so vivid an impression of concentrated speed and urgency as that race back to Gander with the Buick bumping over the rutted track and the fir trees whipping past like palings in a roadside fence.

At ten minutes past one with Flight Lieutenant Hillwood at the controls the Canberra started back from Gander. Soon the sunlit sparkle of the Atlantic vanished and flying was an uneventful sameness, a ticking off of minutes and miles: miles of unrelieved cloudscape. But this time, although there was no outward change in sensation, they were spurred by the knowledge from the flight plan that with the following wind, they were speeding home at over 600 m.p.h. against the outward journey's average speed of 456 m.p.h.

Even to Beamont who was no longer at the controls but watching, as captain of the aircraft, the flying and navigation, time passed rapidly. Half an hour and they were at the top of their climb. An hour straight and level and they had reached the point of no return; a thousand miles from Newfoundland, a thousand miles to the British Isles. Another hour and it was time to start descending.

In their absence a front had moved across Northern Ireland, blanketing ocean and island with low overcast and rain. Thirty-five miles from the Irish coast they were still in solid cloud at 4,000 feet. Watson contacted Aldergrove and they were homed onto the station. At their estimated time of arrival they were still in cloud at 2,000 feet, straining their eyes through the murk for a glimpse of the ground.

'Canberra, you are very near or overhead,' called Aldergrove on radio telephone. 'We have heard you pass.' A moment later Aldergrove control was reporting again. 'Canberra you have overshot. Steer three-one-oh.'

Still descending Hillwood swung the Canberra back sharply and emerged from cloud in a diving turn over Aldergrove's wet grey runway. It was ten hours, nine minutes, since they had left with the sunrise. At an average speed of 606 m.p.h. they had flown back from Newfoundland in three hours, twenty-five minutes, making a total flying time of seven hours fifty-nine minutes for the flight which earned for Beamont and his crew the Royal Aero Club's Britannia trophy for the year's best performance in the air.

They swallowed a cup of tea, faced the barrage of photographers and press men, and took off for Warton where their wives were waiting. Some bottles of beer were produced and crowding into Beamont's office they drank to the successful trip.

A telegram was handed to him. 'It missed you at Northern Ireland and was sent over specially,' his secretary said.

Beamont opened it and read:

'The Queen warmly congratulates you and the crew on your remarkable achievement to-day in twice flying the Atlantic in the Canberra jet bomber.'

He passed it to Hillwood and Watson. 'How about that?' he said; and suddenly the flight acquired an importance of which they had not previously been conscious.

They read through the official congratulations and glanced at one or two of the rest. A message in a schoolboy's handwriting set him chuckling.

'Listen, I rather like this.' He read aloud:

> ' "DEAR BEAMONT,
>
> Will you please send me a photograph of you and the Canberra. The reason I ask is because I think you're the best test pilot in the world except of course Neville Duke and Mike Lithgow." '

He pushed the pile aside. 'We'll see the rest in the morning.'

The telephone rang. 'The press are waiting for you sir,' a works' policeman said. 'Oh no,' protested Beamont. 'We had the press reception at Aldergrove.'

'These are mainly local papers, sir.'

Beamont paused. The reaction from the long flight, the sustained tension and the reward of success were beginning to take toll. To face yet again another barrage of questions about what it was like, and what had happened, from men who would not accept the truth that there was nothing to tell, that the flight had been routine and without incident—oh no, his tiredness protested. All he wanted was to get away quietly and relax. To have a quiet private supper at home with Watson and Hillwood and their wives off the Canadian salmon they had brought back with them.

'All right,' he assented. 'Better get it over. But this is the last. Definitely!'

They survived more questions, more photographs. 'I'll ring Greta,' Beamont said to his wife, 'and warn her about the supper.'

Instead of their maid, a man's voice answered the call and gave Beamont's own telephone number.

'Who are you?' demanded Beamont in surprise.

'I'm *Daily*—,' said the voice aggressively. 'Who are you?'

'The owner of the house you are in,' Beamont said.

'Oh, you're Beamont? Well buck up and come home will you. We've been waiting since six o'clock. We want to take some pictures. There's some other chaps here too.'

'Yes, well do you think I might speak to my maid?'

'I suppose so. I'll call her.'

'Greta,' said Beamont, 'What exactly is going on there?'

'There are newspapermen in the drawing-room,' the maid answered. 'I couldn't stop them. They just pushed in and said they'd wait, you wouldn't mind. Is it all right?'

Beamont hung up and explained the position to the others. 'In case they don't believe Greta,' he said, 'we won't go home for an hour or so.'

They crowded into a car and drove to a hotel in the hope that a friend staying there would give them refuge. Beamont went to the reception. A fugitive from his own home, he was still in the clothes in which he had been flying. On the table by the desk lay evening papers with front page photographs of the Canberra and her crew, and headlines heralding their return.

The hall porter stared at the tweed jacket and the open necked shirt with a muffler tucked into the collar, and his expression stiffened in disapproval, as Beamont asked if his friend was in the hotel.

'Aye,' he admitted in his own time.

'I would like to see him please.'

The hall porter settled back on his stool. A man who knew no better than to appear at half-past seven in the evening in sports clothes which looked as though they might have been slept in, was obviously not worth consideration.

'He'll be about somewhere,' said the porter grudgingly. 'You can look in the lounge if you like.' With a gesture of dismissal he returned to his paper.

For a moment Beamont was infuriated and was about to demand the manager. But he checked himself. The one thing he was trying to escape was more fuss. He did not want to go looking for it.

He went back to the car. 'No luck,' he said. 'Let's go and have a drink. The chances are we won't be recognized. And anyway, I'm certainly not going home until those reporters have gone.'

They drove round St. Annes and went into a large bar that was almost empty.

The barmaid glanced at him curiously. She gave him a second look as she handed him the change for the drinks.

'Oh you're back!' she said in a matter-of-fact tone.

'Yes we're back,' he agreed, but she had already turned away to another customer.

With a grin Beamont carried the tray to his party. For the first time since they had landed at Aldergrove he felt that he really was home.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE FARNBOROUGH BAN

IN Beamont's first public demonstration of the Canberra had stolen the limelight from the fighters at the S.B.A.C. show. Five years later as the Farnborough week approached, it was obvious that for Beamont there would be no need for any scene stealing. The bare announcement that the P.1 had reached supersonic speed in level flight, had already established the aircraft as the highlight of British aviation.

This was Britain's first straight and level supersonic fighter, to which the first reference had been made less than six months earlier in the White Paper on the Defence Estimates. To deal with the threat of hostile bombers flying at great heights and at speeds approaching that of sound, demanded 'a proper fighting machine whose speed well exceeds that of sound,' the White Paper reported. 'We have made good progress in this direction and have reasonable hope that a research aircraft will fly within the next twelve months.'

The White Paper's reference to 'research aircraft' was as conservative as its time estimate, although it is true that a Ministry of Supply specification for a research aircraft was initially responsible for the birth of the P.1. Little was then known about designing for supersonic flight. Aircraft manufacturers both in this country and in the United States were encountering difficulties in projects designed to dive to near sonic speed. The most popular theory of sweeping back the wing was still unproved; and it was to investigate the effect of the highly swept-back wing on flight that the specification for a research aircraft had been issued.

By the time the English Electric team had completed work on a design study, the result went far beyond the Ministry's requirement for a research aircraft, and provided a convincing design for a supersonic fighter. So impressed were the Ministry of Supply and Air Ministry chiefs that a new specification was written round the fighter, and the unusual step was taken of placing an order for twenty pre-production models in addition to the usual prototypes. This heralded a new approach to dealing with the problems of future types of aircraft, and minimizing delays by having a number of models available for simultaneous trials.

In order that there should be no interference with the development of the fighter, it was decided that Short Brothers should build a low-speed flying model—the S.B.5—to test the stability and control characteristics of the English Electric wing and tail geometry. Considerable concern existed over the problem of maintaining stability with highly swept wings at low speeds. The English Electric company's solution was to place the tail-plane low on the fuselage below the wake of the airflow over the wing, but Farnborough favoured a high tail above the influence of the airflow. At Farnborough's request the S.B.5 was therefore fitted firstly with a high tailplane, and then with the low English Electric tail.

In consequence a close co-operation developed between the Ministry of Supply establishment at Farnborough, English Electric and Short's, and contributed much to the speed and freedom from the trouble with which Britain's first supersonic fighter took the air. From the flight research programme carried out jointly by Short Brothers and Farnborough on the S.B.5 came valuable information for solving problems and avoiding difficulties on the P.1; and in the spring of Tom Brook-Smith, Short's chief test pilot, and S/Ldr. Potocki of Farnborough's research department were joined by Beamont, who carried out a series of twenty-five flights on the S.B.5 for the purpose of developing a wing modification for the P.1 in time for its first flight. By this means much was learnt of the probable low speed characteristics of the P.1 before it had flown.

Although the P.1's first flight took place only a month before the S.B.A.C. show, the minimum number of flying hours to qualify for display at Farnborough was quickly passed, and it was generally taken for granted that the P.1 would automatically make a restricted appearance.

Beamont was in fact pondering how he could best show the P.1 within the limits to which the machine had been tested when a member of the ground crew remarked: 'We're not going to be flying it at Farnborough then, sir?'

'Aren't we?' asked Beamont. 'Who told you that?'

'One of the lads. He heard it down the village.'

'Well, so long as we know!'

The rumour proved to be true. The Ministry of Supply had banned the appearance of the P.1 at Farnborough.

There were critics in plenty, of course, and arguments enough can be made out both for and against the reasonableness of this type of restriction: but the ultimate value of the action may prove to be not so much security as commonsense. Undoubtedly the P.1 marked the beginning of a new era. The jet-fighter chapter starting with the Vampire and Meteor had reached its climax with the Swift and Hunter. This was the beginning of Britain's supersonic age.

In any case the national interest demanded that the development of the P.1 should proceed as smoothly and rapidly as possible; and if, screened from the glare of publicity and its attendant distractions, the work could proceed more steadily and bring closer the day when the R.A.F. could be equipped with fully operational supersonic fighters, the end must justify the means no matter how ludicrous some of the restrictions might at the time have appeared.

Beamont, the chief test pilot, appreciated the advantages of the ban, although Beamont, the airman, could regret its need. He was proud of the P.1, proud of his association with the aircraft and the team who had produced it, and eager to establish it as a successful design as quickly as it was possible to do so.

Instead, however, Beamont demonstrated the Canberra on the first three days of the S.B.A.C. show and then returned to Boscombe to continue work on the P.1.

In the pilots' tent leg-pulling and speculation greeted the news that he was not staying at Farnborough for the rest of the week. Some aeronautical correspondents took it for granted that his departure meant he would be making a dramatic reappearance with the P.1 on the Saturday or Sunday, and bluntly refused to believe his denials.

That Saturday afternoon Beamont took off from Boscombe in the P.1 and carried out his flight test schedule over the English Channel. On his way back he found that his circuit was taking him across Farnborough at 40,000 feet.

He switched on the radio. 'Hunter, one minute,' he heard Farnborough Control warn Neville Duke.

Duke, he guessed, would probably be at the same height, but he was approaching from Dunsfold and there was no risk of their paths intercepting. Enjoying the irony of the situation Beamont held his heading.

'Hunter, clear to start dive,' Farnborough said.

Beamont looked down on the small pear-shaped blot, a thin neck of runway with a bulb of crowd and buildings at one end. For a moment he was sorely tempted. To aim a pressure wave at the aerodrome without being seen would be simple.

Of course he could not expect a surprise supersonic bang to remain a mystery for long. Too many people were expecting some sign of the P.1. In fact on his last day with the Canberra at Farnborough, the remark of air correspondent Oliver Stewart, 'Well, we'll be hearing from you, Bee, before the end of the week!' had been both challenge and forecast.

There would be no difficulty in guessing who had caused the unexpected bang. But even if hairs were split to argue that as the P.1 had remained unseen, he could hardly be accused of breaking the ban on the aircraft's appearance, he would be guilty of transgressing the notice warning all airmen away from the area during the display.

The sense of responsibility prevailed, and unseen and unheard, the P.1 continued on course for Boscombe.

'Good Lord!' exclaimed Beamont, suddenly surprised at himself for resisting the temptation, 'I must be getting old!'

EPILOGUE

A TEST PILOT'S CREED

The top of the climb is reached. The aircraft settles down on course. Land is five hundred miles behind, and ahead lie fifteen hundred miles of nothing but sea and purple-grey cloud. The sun is at the hour of awakening. For a moment conscious thought is submerged in a reflective tranquillity of peace and solitude. Long after the tumult and the shouting die, and dust gathers on the trophy in the cupboard, those moments of communion and contentment will be remembered.

They are not, of course, the reward of the flying man alone. At some time or another most people experience this rare vision, a consummation of the spirit which swells the heart with enchantment and thanksgiving. It may come with dawn light or a dying sunset; in an empty church or a child's laugh; in the stinging leather of a catch of victory, or unexpected relief of worry. The moments are reached occasionally by lovers in perfect harmony and unison, although their nature is an individual inspiration that is not for sharing except through understanding from like experience. The feeling is not easy to capture, but it is found more frequently by pioneers and those who venture into the lonely places of earth, sea and sky. By comparison the pride and pleasure in accomplishing something that no one has done before is a material, passing satisfaction.

Naturally the pilot of a record-breaking flight is proud of his contribution, and conscious of honour when his name is added to the roll of records which mark the progress of aviation, but the satisfaction is qualified by the knowledge that the achievement is basically the result of one aircraft being a little faster than another. In contrast to the personal triumph of natural human endeavour when a mountaineer reaches his summit, or a runner runs his four-minute mile, a pilot in his honesty can feel no more than an association with a new aviation record. That is no false modesty about the skill, courage, and effort involved. It is the logical outcome of the contradiction in the make-up of the modern pilot, and the experimental test pilot particularly. On the one hand he is an instrument of science to be propelled by mechanical means in a sphere outside the normal element of man. On the other, like farmer, sailor, explorer and all who live close to nature, he is inescapably a man of religion and philosophy.

Test-flying has trained him in finding out the 'Why' of aircraft, and complicated though these may be, that is a simpler quest than diagnosing the 'Why' of himself and his profession.

To date test pilots have been flying men first, although Germany did try training scientists to fly. Multop of the Focke Wulfe design team was one who was trained in basic flying so that he could conduct the test flights with the outlook of the drawing-office. Generally, however, there was little success in combining the two essentially different temperaments.

Apart from temperament, the time required to train a man jointly as a qualified scientist and adequate pilot, makes the idea of combining both roles for experimental test flying impracticable. Testing present-day, high-speed aircraft involves physical demands which make it a young man's job. As it is, a background of ten to fifteen years' flying experience is necessary to reach the standard of a chief test pilot, and the period of useful research flying in front of him is short enough without further curtailment through years spent in training to the stage where he could be of value as an aeronautical scientist.

The advantage of the test pilot over an auto pilot lies in his ability to think and take relevant decisions when some unexpected element intervenes. He has the human problem of counteracting the human fallibility of all the people concerned in the design. That more than counterbalances his own liability to error, and the theory that electronic instrumentation might take the place of the test pilot is not likely to be revived unless physiological conditions ultimately rule out the presence of man in the cockpit.

In spite of the increasing complexities of the job, the test pilot must still come from the airman, who, in addition to his love of flying, will have an aptitude for engineering and an enquiring mind that enjoys research. He will not be afraid of insecurity, but he will certainly not be reckless, and as one of the greatest preventatives of accidents, he needs a sense of well-being in the air. He must be calculating, and capable of developing an outlook of calmness in crisis: the ability to think clearly and observe at times when everything is trying to prevent him from doing so.

A production test pilot flies for the love of flying, but the experimental test pilot—why should he in peacetime accept the discomfort and risk of racing about the sky at ever-increasing speeds in untried aircraft? This is not the joy of flight. Powered controls have taken away the feel of the aircraft that meant flying to the pilots of the 'stick and string' days. Today pilots, like Beamont, who are acclaimed the fastest men in the world, find the pleasure of flying, not so much in speed, but in the remoteness they can now attain above 40,000 feet. There, like a swimmer kicking off a hampering costume to swim more freely in the embracing waters, the pilot is free of the sticky density of lower altitude. The air is thin and still and quiet, offering virtually no resistance as he flies in unrestrained abandon about the silent pool of the heavens. There, for him, lies the meaning of flight: the poetry of motion, the harmony of thought and body on the wing, the infusion of peace and contentment, the nourishment of the philosophic mind.

Speed is only the means to the end, and the cultivation of speed and more speed seems faintly ridiculous. Why, he will ask himself, is there such an urgency to fly at a thousand miles an hour, and then two, and then five, and ten thousand miles an hour with still no stopping? Progress? What sort of progress? What value can this speed have?

The basis of the ultimate exploration of space? Yes, with that goal he is enthusiastically in sympathy, knowing the benefits he himself has derived on the bare fringe of the heavens. But that is a goal for unity of action and singleness of purpose, taken slowly and gradually, not running before one knows how to walk, not pressed by impatient haste, by the feverish compulsion of military purpose, that shatters the dream of Wilbur Wright. And so, if he is Roland Beamont, the peaceful heart of the airman is sometimes moved to wonder 'Why': why does he have to be an experimental test pilot?

There are reasons of economics and eating, the fascination of scientific research, and the gratification of the pioneer, but they do not by themselves add up to sufficient cause. There has to be more than that. With the trained mind of the test pilot he ignores the red herrings, and looks deeper: 'Why?' He is back to those odd moments of insight.

Test flying gives the pilot a sense of endeavour, of doing something worth while, and a feeling of oneness with the job. The aircraft is identified with himself, particularly when a new prototype has to be flown by him.

For three or four years he has been looking forward to that moment. He has worked with the design team on rates of roll, pressurization, cockpit lay-out, vision angles, and as the aircraft grows, so the tension mounts. Every department that has passed anything at all to do with the aircraft, its services, and installation, is beginning to wonder whether its action has been correct and without room for error. People's nerves are on edge; and if for any reason the aircraft does not fly on the scheduled date, tension and nerves rise to an unbearable pitch.

The pilot is curiously unaffected by this epidemic of nerves, and can even find secret amusement in its manifestation. The scientists are worrying about their 'slide-rule' calculations, but the pilot has, so far, less to worry about. His work is yet to come. There will be fleeting qualms, of course, as the day for the 'hops' leading to the first flight, draws near, but nothing disturbing. Once again a sense of immediate purpose stifles anxieties, and perhaps, too, it is as if the worries of everyone else leave him no room for his own.

And then the time for the first flight arrives. He gets into the cockpit, and shuts the canopy roof, shuts himself off from all the noise and the anxieties of everyone who has had anything to do with the aircraft. The worries of several hundred people are in his hands, but they are not a weight to lie heavily upon him, they are an inspiration to find out all that there is to know, and he alone can do it. All their work and faith has converged into him as the arrowhead.

More than the subsequent flight itself, it is that instant as the canopy roof slides home and the silence in the cockpit engulfs him, that is Beamont's big moment: the reward of the experimental test pilot, and the goal which led him personally to the flying of Britain's first jet bomber, and Britain's first straight and level supersonic fighter.